

Introduction

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The great Greek theorists were not enamored of democracy. They felt the mass was too impulsive and too readily manipulated to manage the responsibilities of governance. When we look through the eyes of Thucydides and Aristotle, we see the Greek experience with democratic rule as a history of property appropriation, warfare, demagoguery, and eventually dictatorship. Democracy was a dangerous way to proceed.

This Greek view remained widely accepted in the eighteenth-century United States when nationwide representative democracy was first put into practice. But this deeply felt caution was tempered by a strong belief that citizens should have some say in how government is run. The U.S. Constitution, as it was originally adopted, reflected this duality of thought. Only members of the House of Representatives were directly elected, and the bicameral demands associated with any legislative action, further enhanced by the presidential veto, ensured that the House could not operate with autonomy.

Over time, the selection of leaders in the United States has become decidedly more democratic. The members of the U.S. Senate are directly elected and, for all intents and purposes, so is the president. The scope of the electorate has changed, too, with the elimination of previous systematic exclusions such as poverty, gender, and race. By any reasonable standard, the contemporary United States meets the fundamental standards of representative democracy: adult citizens are allowed to select their leaders in open competitive elections, and these leaders are in a position to determine the policy under which the society operates.

In retrospect, the American experience with democratic government has been far more successful than the classical view might have expected. While going through occasional bouts of demagoguery, volatility, and perhaps irresponsibility, the U.S. government has both reflected the broad-gauged demands of the public and maintained the sorts of stability conducive to eco-

conomic and social development—this despite the fact the electorate is comprised of ordinary citizens who are only indifferently attentive to public affairs.

To be sure, keen observers had long been aware of the relatively unsophisticated mind-set of most citizens. Such thoughtful analysts as Lord Bryce (1899) and Walter Lippmann (1965) were profoundly aware of how shallow were democracy's public opinion roots. The fact that democratic government was built on the broad public's uncertain judgment gave great pause. Getting directly to the point, this ongoing concern was epitomized by H. L. Mencken's famous quip, "Democracy is the art of running the circus from the monkey cage."

And yet in mid-twentieth-century America, it was quite a shock to the intellectual community when social scientists started to discover the flimsy structure of public opinion on which democratic politics is based. The most critical evidence was presented by Philip E. Converse (1964). Using survey data, he showed that most voters had only a vague sense of public affairs. Converse's work revealed that the public had little understanding of public policy and found that political views were haphazardly disconnected and judgments about politicians and policies were so unstable that the vast majority of Americans apparently held no serious political attitudes at all. What appeared to be genuine opinions were instead "doorstep" opinions manufactured on the spot to please the interviewer.

These early survey analyses first struck a chord of disharmony—they provided detailed scientific evidence about the profound limits of the general public's political understanding and about the indifference with which the public regarded the national policy debate. This unflattering portrait led to twenty years of scientific controversy about whether citizens had real opinions or not.

Even more important, however, was Converse's (1975) emphasis on the mismatch between the framework organizing the political views of ordinary citizens and the framework of elite political debate. When the mass public thinks about politics in quite different ways than the politicians it elects, it is difficult for politicians to translate mass preferences into public policy. For example, if people judge on the basis of partisanship and the state of the times while politicians think ideologically, then the policy guidance that politicians derive from an election might have little to do with actual public policy preferences. Or more subtly, if people see issues as essentially distinctive matters that incorporate different mixtures of principles and interests, then politicians who think in terms of ideological coalitions will find it difficult to craft stable governing coalitions.

The mid-twentieth-century "behavioral revolution" in political science was a precursor to the rebirth of interest in the importance of "institutions." *Institution* in this context refers to established patterns of mutually reinforcing regularities. Institutions might be formally constituted organizations or formal legal rules (e.g., Congress and the rules under which it operates), but they also

might include any established patterns of human behavior that govern what is and what is not possible (e.g., what are viewed as legitimate female roles or how attentive people are to news and public affairs). Many of these early behavioral findings fit naturally into an institutional context.

For democratic government, the key institution, far more important than legal voting requirements, campaign finance laws, the party nomination process, or any other formal arrangement, is the underlying structure of public opinion. That, of course, was a critical subject of these early investigators. The nature of that structure—and how it connects elite politics to the mass public—is the key to understanding the mass base of democratic rule. We need to know the sorts of set patterns that more or less permanently shape the way that the public and politicians interact.

Some findings are now widely accepted.

- Parents transmit political values to their children and that this tends to preserve continuities in the politics of social class, ethnic group, and geographic region. Thus, politicians and parties and political regimes could persist in localities, with their original coalitional base kept intact from one generation to the next, barring any fundamental change in their policy orientations.
- Most citizens think about politics in terms of their group orientations—economic groups, religious groups, or ethnic groups. And of course, the principle of group interests undergirds the organization of Washington’s K Street politics in a way that legitimizes contemporary elite politics.
- People develop allegiances to the two main political parties that encompass both performance evaluations and a psychological self-identification with abstract symbols. Savvy politicians, understanding the permanent and the transient in political attitudes, shape their electoral appeals to reinforce their partisan supporters while attempting to woo the uncommitted. Modern campaigns both mobilize the base and curry favor with marginal voters. All this leads to a highly stylized—and complex—set of symbolic rhetoric and policy promises.

The importance of this structure is so well known—so ingrained in conventional wisdom—that we can easily forget that it constitutes a form of political institution. But outlining this understanding only shows how powerful electoral theory might develop: it needs to establish a richer base of scientific regularities, one that further expands our ability to think about what is possible and what is not possible in electoral democracy.

For example, we can outline a number of commonplace propositions about the mass-elite connection that produce strong theory.

- If the public were entirely inattentive toward politicians’ policy-making, then we might reasonably expect politicians to be entirely indifferent to their

constituents' political views. Policy-making would be determined by the internal politics of Washington, with electoral implications a minor afterthought.

- If we understand a strong class bias in voting turnout, the poor and less well educated neglecting the polls, we might expect that there would be an unrealized opportunity for class-based parties to mobilize votes and win elections.
- If politics were organized mainly along a single ideological liberal-conservative dimension and voters choose the party "closest" to their own preferences, then we understand that parties and candidates (and ultimately public policies) will converge on the centrist median voter position.
- If ideology (or what passes for political philosophy) were mere pap in the public's mind, then candidates would understand that developing ideological argument—developing overarching symbolic justifications—would be a waste of time and would refrain from such discussion.

Of course, scientific observation shows all these propositions to be far off the mark. The public does pay attention to public debate and policy-making, and politicians take great pains to please the general public. The relatively minor class-based differences in turnout are hardly the stuff of incipient partisan realignment, though they may be important from time to time. U.S. politics are largely multidimensional, and it is not at all clear that voters prefer muddled centrism to clearly distinctive policy advocacy. And the symbolism of political philosophy continues to play a part in both elite debate and in electoral campaigns.

To be sure, we genuinely need to know much more than we do. While each of these simple propositions is demonstrably false on its own terms, each does contain some truth. And more than that, the discipline is in the process of developing richer ideas about how mass politics is structured. The current agenda includes:

The nature of public opinion itself. To what extent do people hold meaningful political views? Are there overarching principles that organize political thinking? If so, what are they?

Information processing. How do people incorporate new information? What do people retain of the information they encounter? How does the typical citizen use new information in making political judgments?

Group and party identification. What does it mean to identify with a group or political party? How does identification shape political behavior?

Linkage mechanisms. What sorts of linkage mechanisms translate public judgments into a force in elite politics? Do those mechanisms produce stable connections between mass and elite, or do the connections vary

meaningfully? How much should elites be guided by mass publics? Are elites willing to ignore short-term mass preferences in the interest of what those elites perceive to be long-term mass preferences?

Democratic capacity. Are the known limitations of mass publics as decision makers readily overcome when people are systematically exposed to more information and discussion? What type of decisions would a more informed and engaged citizenry produce?

This book is about electoral democracy in the United States, with a special emphasis on the stable, regularized, institutionalized features of the connections between ordinary citizens and elite policy-making. In the essays in this volume, the authors push our boundaries of understanding and invite a more rigorous form of theorizing about the potentialities of democratic government.

Individual Psychology and Electoral Democracy

The first four chapters in the book deal with the factors that shape citizens' thinking about politics. The first chapter, written by Donald R. Kinder, considers the question of how people organize their political attitudes. When Converse showed that most citizens do not organize their attitudes along a liberal-conservative continuum, he left open the question of how—or even whether—people organize their political thoughts and feelings. Converse's original answer stressed the great heterogeneity of the electorate—some people do follow a well-organized and sophisticated liberal-conservative view of politics, while others appear to give virtually no systematic thought whatsoever to politics. For the bulk of the electorate, some mechanisms existed, but they were looser and more oriented toward relevant groups than toward fundamental political principles.

This reliance on feelings toward groups is Kinder's starting point as he considers the factors that shape current thinking about politics. Kinder suggests a coherent and powerful explanation for how citizens organize their political thoughts: they use ethnocentrism—or ethnic identification—to provide a pervasive orientation toward matters that range well beyond the politics of race or ethnicity itself. His conclusions, however, should give pause because they surely buttress the worries of democracy's doubters: all over the world, the politics of ethnic division have proven enormously appealing to ambitious politicians and have produced unmitigated human disaster. Kinder's work should prove both crucial and controversial because it raises fundamental normative questions about the disturbing character of democratic decision making.

The next chapter, written by Larry M. Bartels, picks up a different piece of the intricate question of how masses think about politics and what this means for democratic governance. Bartels returns to the fundamental question of atti-

tude stability and instability and addresses in a remarkably direct way the question of how effectively mass publics can fulfill their role as self-governors. The chapter is deeply rooted in the contemporary psychological literature as well as in modern theories of social choice. While disagreeing with the commonplace notion that citizen attitudes are nonsense, he shows clearly that having meaningful attitudes is not the same as having meaningful preferences and thus that meaningful attitudes are not enough to provide the foundation for democratic government. At root, this argument calls for a much more sophisticated theory about how the public governs itself—and commands the attention of democratic theorists of all stripes. Needless to say, Bartels's contention should provoke a serious reaction.

Together, the Kinder and Bartels chapters provide a picture of how individual psychology and mass attitudes interact to help shape democratic politics in the United States. Their work here is part of a general renaissance of interest in how citizens' fundamental behavior informs our judgments of democracy.

The next two chapters provide broad overviews of important areas of research. Herbert F. Weisberg and Steven H. Greene examine partisanship, and Marco R. Steenbergen and Milton Lodge examine how citizens evaluate political objects such as candidates and parties.

In making sense of mass voting behavior, party identification has been a critical concept—by many accounts *the* critical concept. In some ways, parties are just another group, but they are very specialized groups. They exist to compete for office.

Parties serve as linchpins for democratic politics in all advanced industrial democracies. In some systems, partisanship—the idea of identifying with a party—is very difficult to separate from electoral choice because people vote for a party. In the United States, with its multiple elections and candidate-centered campaigns, partisanship can be quite distinct from any particular vote decision. Partisanship is among the most durable of political attitudes in the United States. Unlike specific issue preferences or even ideology, a person's partisanship tends to hold over fairly lengthy time periods (Converse 1976; Converse and Markus 1979).

Weisberg and Greene put the concept of party identification into the context of contemporary social psychology, updating the intellectual bases for the concept that originated in the social psychology of a half century ago. They provide a comprehensive review of the literature and suggest promising paths along which new research might follow. The chapter is a natural starting point for students of electoral politics interested in partisanship and a major reference for scholars more generally.

In studying the political behavior of electorates, we need to move beyond group or party orientations. By any standard, it is critical to know how citizens process information and make political judgments. When evaluating candi-

dates such as George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Al Gore, how do voters use the information they encounter? Understanding the modes of political cognition will inform our fundamental views about electoral democracy.

Consider two different cognitive styles: “memory-based” and “on-line” information processing. When people using the memory-based style encounter information, they store the information in memory, to be used in forming evaluations about the candidates. Later, when talking politics or making voting decisions, these individuals call up the various specific bits of information and integrate them into the conversation or the political judgment. This, of course, is the sort of learning one ordinarily associates with schoolbooks and exams. Alternatively, when people using the on-line style encounter the same information, they use it to update immediately their judgments about the candidates—and then forget the specifics. At any later time, they can provide meaningful evaluations of the candidates but cannot reproduce the detailed information that went into those evaluations. Similar to share prices on Wall Street, the individuals’ current evaluations reflect reasoned interactions with real information but appear free from the details that formed them.

This distinction is important for theory. While the voters with different cognitive styles might utilize the same information to come to a decision, on-line processors would *seem* a good deal less informed than memory-based processors. When interviewed by a researcher, on-line types are unable to connect their judgments with facts or arguments and appear to construct their views out of whole cloth, when in fact they have developed rich and meaningful evaluations. Thus, the apparent confusion and instability that political scientists often find in the electorate could be entirely misleading. It is clearly possible that citizens powerfully use political information in making their judgments while at the same time evince little residue of the specifics. If this were so, then we should be cautious about uncritically accepting the modern survey-based evidence that supports the Greek theorists’ concerns. We should begin to reassess the conventional view of a woefully inadequate citizenry and begin to think anew about how the electorate’s views anchor democratic government.

In part, this is an empirical question. Do voters more generally tend to be more on line or more memory based? To what information are voters generally sensitive? Do these factors vary by type of information and judgment? The chapter by Steenbergen and Lodge both summarizes and provides thoughtful insight on the ongoing and lively debate surrounding the question of human information processing of political information.

The first four chapters collectively provide a view of the current state of research in electoral politics from the standpoint of individual voter psychology. For any understanding of electoral democracy, this is the base from which all else builds. But we need to understand how individual voter psychology gets integrated into the social political system.

Decision Making

The next chapters deal with the voter as decision maker and suggest that the conventional image of a nonideological, centrist, and essentially passive electorate might well be worth reconsidering. From the standpoint of mass control of policy, the question of how issues affect evaluation and voter choice is central. The standard model that guides both professional and lay discussions of issue voting presumes that people select candidates who are close to them on the issues. This leads to the assumption that centrist candidates should be most successful.

Stuart Elaine Macdonald, George Rabinowitz, and Holly Brasher take issue with that view, arguing that a fundamentally different model more accurately reflects how voters evaluate candidates based on issues. The authors argue that citizens respond to the direction and intensity of candidate positions. Those candidates that fail to provide a clear sense of policy direction do not elicit issue-based responses and are liked and disliked equally by all voters. Rather than drawing centrist voters, centrist candidates are evaluated entirely on non-issue criteria. Successful issue-based candidacies require strong issue stands where the direction of the stance is supported by the majority of the electorate.

Among recent politicians, Bill Clinton and John McCain behaved in ways that fit the precepts of the directional model, while Ross Perot more closely fits the proximity model. Macdonald, Rabinowitz, and Brasher compare and then apply the directional and proximity theories in the context of the 1996 U.S. presidential election. They find considerably stronger support for the directional model. The net implication of their work suggests that parties and candidates have little incentive to move to the political center on specific issues when seeking votes but do have strong incentives to be on the “correct”—that is, more popular—side of important issues.

Closely related to the view that issues are the key element linking politicians’ policy decisions to the mass public’s policy preferences is the view that ideology matters to choice. Elites tend to think and behave ideologically even if the mass public does not, so the ideological proclivities of elected leaders are important to the policies they are likely to enact. The seminal work on formal theory in the modern era, Anthony Downs’s *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), stressed the critical role of ideology as a shortcut for determining how parties were likely to behave when in office. While early survey research provided a strong caution against this simple ideological view of electoral politics, the work did not rule out a potentially potent role for ideology in elections.

Because elite discussion of politics occurs in an ideological frame, even marginally attentive voters are likely to learn the ideological labels and can invest them with positive or negative feelings. Thus, the symbols *liberal* and *conservative* can be important in determining voter behavior (Conover and Feldman

1981) without necessarily being connected to voters' attitudes on substantive issues. Further, while ideology is of mere modest import for most citizens, it is a serious matter for some. And when these ideologues disproportionately favor one side or the other, ideology can have a marked influence on aggregate electoral outcomes. Finally, the politics of ideology reflect not only voters' capacities and inclinations but also politicians' strategic decisions to imbue policy-making and political discourse with ideological symbolism. Examining the behavior of voters and politicians, Michael B. MacKuen, Robert S. Erikson, James A. Stimson, and Kathleen Knight document the recent rise of ideology in American electoral politics.

Almost all research on mass political decision making has focused on citizens' behavior. A somewhat different question is how citizens might behave if they were more fully informed and more thoughtful. Over the last decade there has been marked interest in the concept of deliberative polling, where representative groups of citizens are brought together to consider particular policy problems. This work has led naturally to speculation about what an ideal citizenry would be like—how sophisticated would it be, how widely would it participate, how much tolerance would it have? Would it be good at using the vote to express individual self-interest, or would it be more concerned with the “public good?” Would a more sophisticated and deliberative electorate be more or less likely to pursue politics of the Left or of the Right? Robert C. Luskin considers both the theoretical characteristics that might distinguish a more ideal public and the empirical evidence on how both sophistication and deliberation affect political choices. His chapter indicates that the political consequences are less clear than one might expect and suggests how difficult and how interesting is the exercise of drawing the implications of different institutionalizations in the mass public.

Electoral Democracy from a More Elite Perspective

If elections are more than symbolic events, electoral democracy needs to be an interactive process where the views and desires of the mass public meaningfully influence the behavior of political elites. In turn, the behavior of elites must influence the way the public feels about them. The presumed effectiveness of such mass-elite interactions motivates our concern with the character of public opinion and with the issue and ideological models of vote choice. The public's policy views and issue voting make a difference only if elites understand the genuine implications of people's expressed preferences, if they organize elite politics to reflect those preferences, and if they actually deliver what the public wants.

Michael W. Traugott considers a question that is very much at the heart of majoritarian democracy: Do voters feel that politicians should make decisions

based on mass preferences as indicated by citizens in their responses to public opinion polls? This question could not have arisen in ancient Athens or even in early-twentieth-century America—the public opinion poll is a political institution new to our times. At its best, the scientific poll permits a much more precise and thus more meaningful connection between what the public wants and what elites can provide. However, the history of contemporary opinion polling, with all its peculiarities, suggests that the institution bears some watching. Traugott asks what motivates some voters to feel that politicians should be inclined to use polls and others to feel they should not.

This consideration of the role of political polls in democracy reflects the fundamental tension between majoritarian and elite-controlled democracy that sparked debates about the design of the U.S. Constitution and remains with us today. How much does the public itself play the desire for responsive government against the desire for responsible government? This implicit theme drives Traugott's analysis.

John Aldrich is keenly interested in change and equilibrium in the U.S. system. The fundamental linkage between mass and elite is typically thought to constitute a dynamic system in which a change on the mass side generates a reaction on the part of elites that then produces a change in the public. The cycle repeats itself as each side responds to the other. A concept that is usefully employed with regard to any dynamic system is that of equilibrium. The idea of equilibrium conveys a sense of dynamic tension, in that the system has a capacity to change, but all the pieces are currently in balance. This idea is explicitly formalized in game-theoretic treatments of social phenomena and is of importance for everyday understandings of politics.

Aldrich's chapter considers how the U.S. political system has evolved over the past fifty years, concentrating on the contrasts between equilibrium and disequilibrium. The period saw the remarkable transformation of the American South from a strongly Democratic area to a Republican-leaning region. During the same time frame, the racial landscape of the society was altered so that most African American citizens became free of explicit legally based discrimination. Aldrich's analysis focuses on changes at both the mass and elite levels, and he challenges some critical features of the standard elite-driven model of political change in the twentieth-century United States. His analysis probes both the factors that motivate change and the important role that disequilibrium plays in political systems. The implications of Aldrich's reconceptualization of American politics appear profound—we shall want to think more seriously about what generates stable and unstable political systems and, in truth, about whether political life constitutes a political system at all.

The concluding chapter by John Zaller takes a quite different turn on the question of elite motivation. For savvy politicians, the public opinion that mat-

ters is not that which rules today's opinion polls but instead that which will dominate tomorrow's election campaign. What is important is not *manifest* public opinion but *latent* public opinion. And that future opinion will reflect current policy decisions as political opponents frame them at election time. Following V. O. Key, Zaller focuses on politicians' concern about a foreseeable future, rather than an observed current, public opinion.

The mechanisms of latent opinion—the principles that guide how the public reacts to politicians and politicians lead the public—lie at the heart of democratic government. But they are exceedingly difficult to study because, in essence, latent public opinion is that which *might* have occurred had not politicians anticipated the public response. When in proper equilibrium, the mechanisms will produce outcomes in which the most serious power of public opinion never openly reveals itself. The public response that we do see arises from politicians' inevitable difficulties in anticipating the future and, more important, in pleasing contradictory public demands. But this response pales in comparison with what we might expect had politicians not done everything in their power to anticipate the course of public reactions.

In laying out the implications of politicians' anticipations, Zaller recognizes the imperfections of such a governing system. If voters are generally inattentive and make simplistic judgments—often wanting to have their cake and eat it too—they provide only clumsy guidance for policymakers. Yet these responses motivate politicians to perform to the public's tastes. If the latent-opinion system represents an inexact management tool, it *is* a management tool that constantly forces those in government to seek ways to satisfy the public's strongest demands. And it is an understanding of democracy's powers and limits that is the target of Zaller's essay.

Final Comment

Virtually no serious student of mass electorates has been satisfied with the quality of citizen engagement. Yet all successful modern industrial societies have been democratic. And from a humanistic perspective, there is much to be said for a form of government in which citizens have an explicit say in determining the leaders and policies under which they live. Hence, both historical success and humanistic appeal provide good grounds for having faith in democracy.

But faith is a poor substitute for knowledge. Compared to the full range of human history, our practical experience with democracies and the problems of governing large complex societies is still in its early stages. Much remains to be learned about what is real, systematic, and consequential, and what is not. The quality and durability of electoral democracy as a political form ultimately will

rest on our collective ability to appreciate and protect its strengths while understanding and improving upon its weaknesses. The chapters in this book are directed toward that end.

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