Jeffrey Friedman

Ignorance as a Starting Point: From Modest Epistemology to Realistic Political Theory

Introduction

The volume number is a lagging indicator,[1] but *Critical Review* was founded 20 years ago. As we enter our third decade, I am pleased to report that Routledge, storied publisher of the two most important influences on *Critical Review* - Austrian philosopher Karl Popper and Austrian economist F. A. Hayek - will now be marketing the journal, affording scholars and students around the world searchable electronic access to two decades of "content." This seems, then, to be an appropriate time for a stocktaking of that content, one that might also serve as an introduction to the journal for new readers.

When I started *Critical Review* I was animated, in part, by a dim recognition that Hayek and Popper shared more than Viennese origins. While Popper was a social democrat and Hayek was a classical liberal, both of them were profound theorists of the causes and consequences of *human ignorance of a complex world*.

Popper's own starting point was our ignorance of the natural world, and the resulting errors in our scientific theories. But as Hayek recognized, ignorance is an even more appropriate starting point when it comes to the study of human behavior. For one thing, human behavior is (sometimes) governed by human minds, and the human mind's attempts to understand the world - whether natural or social - are relatively unpredictable (e.g., Hayek 1952; Popper [1957] 1991). On top of that, Hayek argued, the social scientist must allow for endless variations in personal knowledge - and in people's *interpretations* of what they think they know.

Hayek emphasized interpersonal differences in knowledge and interpretation because those are what he saw in economic life: different consumers with knowledge of what they think they each need; entrepreneurs with varying "local" knowledge of what they think will suit consumers' felt needs. Hayek's perspective, especially when married to a Popperian emphasis on the conjectural nature of knowledge, sculpts a *Homo economicus* - and a *Homo politicus*, I think - that have little in common with the orthodox neoclassical model of the all-knowing, isolated rational chooser.

If knowledge is interpersonally variable then we must allow, at the very least, for interpersonal forms of *ignorance*, too: one person may not know what another knows. And if the world is complicated enough, or simply vast enough, that people can be ignorant of some of its aspects, surely it is complex enough or vast enough that they can also be *mistaken* about parts of it. If knowledge is conjectural, however, experimentation (both scientific and economic) may discover

truths that correct people's mistakes. Thus, markets and science may be *imperfect processes of ignorance alleviation through error correction*. Finally, if experiments are tests of *interpretations*, then people may not only be knowledgeable, ignorant, or mistaken about discrete facts or "data," but about theories of how facts cause and affect each other - and, therefore, about how best to draw conceptual lines around "the" facts; and about which facts are important to know.

As for *Homo economicus*'s social isolation: theories and interpretations originate in human minds, but most people are relatively passive consumers of theories and interpretations developed by other people. My adoption of someone else's theory, while perhaps a random matter of which theories I happen to encounter and find initially persuasive, is, on the other hand, not completely unpredictable (at least if I am a member of a group to which the law of large numbers can be applied). The heuristics that I use to assess persuasiveness must either be genetically wired or culturally imbibed. And my theoretical views must be constrained not only by the heuristics that I use to assess persuasiveness, but by the fact that I live in a specific place and time, where some theories are readily available to me and others - having been forgotten, unpublicized, discredited, or not yet invented - are not. It would seem, then, that a logical culmination of the Hayek-Popper view is to place great weight on the importance, the potential mistakenness, and the interpersonal transmission of theories: i.e., on culture. The vagaries of culture add yet another layer of complexity to social science, above and beyond the complexity facing the natural scientist.

Naturally and culturally acquired ideas and interpretations, each of them as fallible as the people who - starting out ignorant - *need* to acquire them if they are to try to understand a complex world: this is standard post-Renaissance epistemology. Yet even as the humanities have left conventional epistemology behind, confusing epistemic sophistication with "postmodern" skepticism,[2] the social sciences have gone in the opposite direction, essentially reviving Plato by assuming, implicitly (few would be so foolish as to believe it explicitly), that people have godlike knowledge of everything they need to know - having forgotten, as it were, only what it is "rational" for them to ignore. The Cartesian *cogito* is no triumph for these rational-choice masters of the universe, who not only know that they exist, but who know all the other things that are useful to know, excluding only the "information" whose benefits (they somehow know) would not justify the costs of learning it.

Descartes, by contrast, thought that all claims to knowledge should be questioned, because naturally and culturally perceived truths can be illusory. Descartes led to Hume, thence to Kant and Popper. Kant and Popper led to Hayek (Gray 1984; Clouatre 1987). Not surprisingly, then, Popper and Hayek were both keenly interested in ignorance and error, and in biological and scientific (and, in Hayek's case, economic) evolutionary processes by which ignorance can be overcome, errors corrected, and knowledge acquired.[3]

In hindsight, the papers published in our early volumes seem to have succeeded rather well in asking about the implications of the Popper-Hayek presumption of ignorance.[4] Good answers, however, were not immediately forthcoming. It turned out that grasping the implications of ignorance required a great deal of ground clearing (an effort that continues).[5] And as the ground cleared, it became apparent that something was missing: a bridge between, on the one hand,

Popper's ignorance-centric philosophy of science and Hayek's ignorance-centric economics; and, on the other hand, politics.

Political Ignorance and Modern Democracy

We found the bridge, logically enough, in political science, where "public ignorance" had long been the premier finding in the study of public opinion. A robust literature, tracing its lineage to Philip E. Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" - which *Critical Review* brought back into print last year (Converse [1964] 2006) - quietly kept alive subversive questions about the political competence of the public that had been asked by Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1949) and by Joseph Schumpeter (1950) - yet another Austrian economist.

The main lines of public-opinion research were first reviewed in these pages in 1998, and have been explored since then by a growing number of eminent researchers.[6] In the past decade, *Critical Review* has also published much work by younger scholars[7] who share a desire to explore the causes, consequences, and normative implications of public ignorance by building upon, but going beyond, the established lines of research. The current issue continues both of these trends, with pointed discussions of recent developments in the literature by distinguished public-opinion scholars Robert S. Erikson and Benjamin I. Page; and with inaugural publications by Sebastian Benthall, Stephen Miller, and Christopher Wisniewski, along with a debate over Samuel DeCanio's own inaugural publications, which appeared herein previously. This issue of the journal is therefore a good benchmark of the progress we have made, and of at least the "known unknowns" that remain to be explored.

Miller shows that "liberal" and "conservative" members of the general public share strikingly similar suspicions about employers, businesses, and profits - affirming that, as Converse pointed out, political observers may attribute a spurious logic to public opinion by projecting onto the public ideological differences that are the province of a highly politicized few. Page and Erikson, on the other hand, argue that public opinion is more logical, if not ideological, than it may seem.

Wisniewski's paper challenges the ability of academic "cultural studies" to grasp the realities of political culture; his argument is contested by noted cultural-studies scholar Mark Fenster. And lest anyone interpret Conversean research to commend the rule of experts, Benthall, reviewing Philip E. Tetlock's devastating research into (the absence of) social-scientific expertise (Tetlock 2005), points out that mere inertia, in the form of computer extrapolations of present conditions, predicts the future better than does even the most open-minded group of "experts" (cf. Taleb 2005). In another article, however, economist Bryan Caplan disputes whether Tetlock's findings are as devastating as they appear. The question of so-called experts' expertise is fast becoming a favorite in these pages. Future issues will feature debates on social-psychology literature that, *inter alia,* seems to confirm that experts succumb to a "spiral of conviction." such that they compensate, with dogmatism, for their relatively high levels of knowledge (Friedman 2006a, x-xiv and Appendix).

The Reign of Elites

The Wisniewski-Fenster debate, like that between DeCanio and Daniel Carpenter, Benjamin Ginsberg, and Martin Shefter, suggests that vast research frontiers can be opened by treating ignorance as a starting point in the study of politics. The two debates also illustrate how such research might be integrated with the extant literature to portray modern politics and government far more realistically than has been done to date. Pending the needed research, such a portrait as the one I will now paint is speculative - but it is not purely speculative, since it comports not only with the extant research, but with abundant anecdotal observation of mass democratic processes.

DeCanio asks whether the public's ignorance of politics unwittingly confers a significant degree of "autonomy" upon bureaucratic, judicial, and legislative decision makers. Wisniewski asks what it means to say that the sources of political actors' - and non-actors' - political beliefs is "cultural." Both questions lead to profound epistemic and methodological issues, the resolution of which directly affects one's overarching view of modern political reality.

According to the "Public Ignorance/State Autonomy" (pisa) paradigm that DeCanio champions, public opinion can constrain the autonomy of state officials only to the extent that the public knows what the officials are doing (or to the extent that the officials fear that the public will find out). This constraint presumably shrinks as the size of the state grows (Somin 1998, DeCanio 2000a, DeCanio 2000b, DeCanio 2006). The more things the state does, the less likely that any one of those things will be publicly scrutinized.

This leaves modern democracy with two different sources of governance: the "masses," in the rare cases in which they know and care about what the state is doing; and the "state elites" (bureaucrats, judges, and legislators) who, according to the theory, normally make policy decisions, far from the public eye. Does the ignorant masses' inability to ensure that public officials seek the public good mean that the official seek their own advantage - as popular opinion, echoed by public-choice theory, might suggest?

The answer seems to be no, for the most part. For instance, there is surprisingly little evidence of bureaucratic self-seeking (e.g., Kelman 1987; Blais and Dion 1991; Lewin 1991, ch. 4). The self-interest of bureaucrats seems to be constrained by the fixed terms of advancement in the civil service and by group norms of public service. The same types of constraints would seem to apply to judges. It also stands to reason that recruitment effects would tell against pecuniary motives: neither the pay scales, nor widely taught understandings of the in propriety of self-interest in government - as opposed to its propriety in the economy - would suggest government service as an avenue for the avaricious.

While such constraints might keep self-interest under control, they would still, according to the pisa paradigm, leave considerable scope for state officials to take actions that might be unpopular if they were to come to public attention. If not self-interest, however, what would be the motive for such potentially unpopular actions?

It is logical to suppose (pending further research) an overlap between the tiny fraction of the public that the literature shows is constrained by some political ideology - the *ideological* elite - and the even smaller number of people who make bureaucratic, judicial, and legislative decisions - state elites. Conceivably, this overlap is quite thorough, with state elites effectively a subset of the larger, ideological elite. The ideological elite surely includes people who are intensely interested in politics but don't actually work in government. But personal experience suggests that people who pursue careers in government are likely to be ideologically aware and, indeed, ideologically driven. After all, they are there, in their opinion, to do good - the definition of which begs for ideological definition.

Research on ideology thus far converges on dogmatism as its key trait.[8] To the extent that state elites are indeed ideological elites, then, what we would mean by state autonomy is, generally speaking, rule by dogmatic elites. Normatively speaking, if the actual alternative to rule by the ignorant is rule by the doctrinaire, then modern democracy poses a true Hobson's choice.[9]

Where do ideologies come from? Converse ([1964] 2006, 64) suggested that "the broad contours of elite decisions over time can depend in a vital way upon currents in what is loosely called 'the history of ideas.'" Yet there has been a paucity of research integrating the history of ideas with the actions of political elites. One reason for this is, surely, a positivist legacy that privileges statistical evidence over other kinds. How could one possibly *quantify* the formative influence of Marx's, or Freud's, or Keynes's ideas (or Hayek's) on the political elites of a given era?

No matter. To the extent that state elites are ideological elites, we should investigate the sources of their ideologies, whether with quantitative or "qualitative" methods.

The Occasionally Sovereign People

If not ideology, what determines how the apolitical mass public exercises its occasional veto over semi-autonomous state elites - and its unquestionable ability to rotate elites - through the electoral mechanism?

The public-opinion research shows that most citizens, like most bureaucrats, try to govern not selfishly but "sociotropically": that is, they tend to vote for the politicians whom they think will advance the public good (e.g., Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kiewiet 1983; Lewin 1991, ch. 2). In the absence of ideological guidance about which politicians fit that description, however, sociotropic voting decisions can be based on any number of criteria of the public good, including cues from party leaders (Zaller 1992) or interest groups (e.g., Lupia 2006), characterological or issue heuristics (e.g., Popkin 1991, ch. 3), sympathy with or antipathy toward certain groups (see Kinder 2006, 209), and retrospective economic assessments (e.g., Fiorina 1979), to name several.

But the public has little direct access to information about partisan statements, interest-group endorsements, politicians' character traits and issue positions, or the economic conditions experienced by other citizens. Such "data" must be *communicated* to the public. And if a member

of the public is to understand and use the communicated facts, she must, however implicitly, infer their usefulness from theories, however tacit, about why this particular information is important - and about how to interpret it. One needs a causal *theory* to infer that policy A is conducive to prosperity, or to any other aspect of collective (or, for that matter, personal) well-being. Even the retrospective voter is inferring that some policy undertaken by the incumbent party is responsible for whatever the voter interprets as good, or bad, economic results: "the nature of the times" heuristic, to echo Converse ([1964] 2006, 16ff.) again, is as theory-laden as any other heuristic.

Information-mediating theories may be hard-wired; or they, like the information being mediated, may be communicated from other people. (Or both.) Thus, if we want to know *how* state autonomy is likely to be constrained by the public, it would seem that, among other things, we should study the information and ideas explicitly and implicitly conveyed to the public by the mass media. As part of this research, one might investigate the political beliefs of media personnel, whose own implicit causal theories must play a role in the selection of, and the spin unwittingly placed upon, the information and ideas that they convey to the electorate.

Investigating media personnel's beliefs would also be logical in order to understand *when* state autonomy is likely to be constrained. If, as the pisa paradigm maintains, ignorance is the normal public condition; and if the public can pressure legislators to stop only what the public knows is happening; then, however occasionally, the public must be informed about what is happening, and that depends on the belief of media personnel that something *important* is happening. Given the breadth and depth of public inattention to politics, it would probably take a media firestorm (or a barrage of campaign ads) to inform a large segment of the public about any particular state action. Presumably, then, state actions that media personnel find deeply objectionable will be prime candidates for popular constraint, and other state actions usually won't (unless they can be linked by a well-financed opponent's media consultants to an incumbent politician or party).

Is Ignorance Imposed?

Consider the alternative to the assertions I have just made. If the political world were so simple and straightforward that culturally mass-mediated interpretation of it were unnecessary, then we would need only to open our eyes in order to achieve, for all practical purposes, omniscience about it.

That, for example, is the implicit epistemology of Marx. He didn't think that proletarians will achieve class consciousness by finding the workings of the world illuminated in the pages of *Capital*. Rather, he thought necessary is that proletarians be put on the same factory floor with each other, where they can directly - without mediation - observe each other's exploitation, and draw the right causal conclusions.

Popper (1963, 7-8) called this naïve epistemology "the doctrine of manifest truth." As he pointed out, if the truth is so very obvious, then ignorance - not knowledge - becomes anomalous. *How*

can people fail to see what is manifestly true? Somebody must be *deceiving* them. "The conspiracy theory of ignorance," he wrote, "is a curious outgrowth from the doctrine of manifest truth" (ibid.).

Both DeCanio and Wisniewski are, in part, contesting the conspiracy theory of ignorance. In DeCanio's case, the alleged conspirators are state elites who, as Ginsberg contends, *manipulate* public opinion by *deliberately* creating public ignorance. No doubt this sometimes happens, but do we have reason to think it so widespread that it is an important source of state autonomy? In a society such as the United States, after all, the government does not control the media. Thus, control over public opinion on the part of *state* elites rather than *media* elites would require a *conspiracy* between the two, in most cases.

Similarly, the academic discipline of cultural studies, which Wisniewski contrasts against the much-needed *study of political culture*, tends to reduce culture to a giant conspiracy to promote public ignorance - albeit a very sophisticated type of conspiracy (and a very specific type of ignorance). The conspirators need not even be people, with proper names, who plot their deceptions in secret. "Discourses" that serve to uphold the present order *somehow* arise, Foucault believed, and discourses have the same effect that deliberate lies would have, but much more insidiously. Thus, "ideology" is insinuated into popular culture, shielding the status quo from uprisings against it by the people - who would otherwise apprehend its *manifest* oppressiveness.

By "ideology," cultural studies scholars do not mean what Converse meant: any belief system that (we think) helps us understand the world - including the belief systems of cultural studies scholars. Instead, they mean by "ideology" what Marx meant: *only* belief systems that blind the masses to their own domination and exploitation. Such belief systems, it is assumed, have to be imposed on the masses through ideological manipulation. Otherwise, the true oppressiveness of the status quo would be so *obvious* that it would apprehended by all, and revolution would follow.

In cultural studies, then, cultural processes move "the masses" *toward* ignorance. That they would, otherwise, know the truth is the implicit assumption. By contrast, studies of cultural processes that *begin from* mass ignorance would seem to be natural for scholars familiar with the political-science research.

Here, at the mass level with which Wisniewski is dealing, quantitative approaches might find some traction. However, to the extent that cultural influences are incremental, cumulative, and of varying effectiveness, qualitative methods might be more appropriate. (So, too, as cultural studies scholars recognize, might attention to the entertainment media - not just the news media.)

Is Ignorance Chosen?

Oddly enough, quantitative approaches now share the methodological middle of the road with their polar opposite in political science: rational-choice theory.

Where quantitative scholars are staunchly empiricist statisticians, rational-choice "formal modelers" are resolutely apriorist mathematicians. Their formulae start with the notion that political behavior is instrumentally rational.

This notion is unobjectionable as long as it is treated as an ideal type, so that empirical research can then see whether and where the formulae are relevant. Below, David Meskill applies rational-choice theory to some real-world aspects of democracy, without violating the dictum of Mancur Olson (1965, 161), who concluded *The Logic of Collective Action* by pointing out that there are - of course - cases of "nonrational or irrational" political action; and that, in those cases, "it would perhaps be better to turn to psychology than to economics for a relevant theory." In sharp contrast, rational-choice *universalists*, or "economic imperialists," assume that *all* political behavior is instrumentally rational - even ideology; and even ignorance.

Rational-ignorance theory is built atop the theory of rational nonvoting. This offshoot of rational-choice theory begins with the fact that in a mass election, the odds of any one vote changing the outcome are minuscule. Therefore, it would be logical for an instrumentally rational member of the electorate to advance her political goals by doing almost anything other than going to the polls. Rational-ignorance theory then points out that there is little reason to acquire political information that, by the logic of rational nonvoting, would serve only to inform a vote that it doesn't make sense to cast in the first place. Thus, according to rational-ignorance theory, people deliberately *choose* to be politically ignorant because they *know* that their vote wouldn't matter anyway.

The most glaring problem with the theory of rational nonvoting has always been "the paradox of voting." The hundreds of millions of votes that *are* cast indicate that (in the case of hundreds of millions of people) the theory does not apply to the real world. The prevalence of voting has similar consequences for the rational-ignorance hypothesis, since it would never be instrumentally rational to cast a vote that one *knows* is inadequately informed: doing so might mean voting for the opposite of the outcome one would actually favor if one weren't ignorant.[10]

It would seem, then, either that voters vote for non-instrumental reasons (such as the fulfillment of a perceived duty to vote); or that voters are instrumentally rational, but are ignorant of the astronomical odds against their vote affecting the outcome. Alternatively, they may simply be ignorant of their own larger political ignorance, rather than having *chosen* to be ignorant for any reason at all. This is to say that those voters who are instrumentally rational and ignorant are ignorant *inadvertently* - not rationally, nor irrationally, but accidentally.

"The flight from reality in the human sciences"[11] is, in large part, a flight from the messiness of ignorance, and the directly related messiness of human error. One result of the social-scientific "rationalization" of human action is to subtract from the human condition the experience of *surprise*.

Surprise is always a product of ignorance: either ignorance *simpliciter,* or ignorance of the fact that what one thought one knew turns out to have been wrong. We are surprised by "unknown unknowns" - of which, a post-Hayekian economist points out, we are "radically," (as opposed to

rationally, ignorant (Ikeda 2003). What makes surprise surprising is the ignorance that makes surprise unchosen. One might as reasonably concoct a formal model of the unexpected as one could assign odds to an unprecedented event (cf. Taleb 2007). But the pointlessness of modeling them formally or statistically does not make unknown unknowns any less important.

Only God is never surprised. By the same token, the rational chooser of ignorance is effectively omniscient: rational ignorance is knowing not only what one should, but what one shouldn't (rationally) know - which one therefore deliberately decides to ignore.

Where the Marxist portrays ignorance as being deliberately imposed on the people by bourgeois ideologists, the rational-ignorance theorist portrays ignorance as being deliberately imposed by the people on themselves. But how do voters, any more than bourgeois ideologists, know the relevant "information": the theory of rational nonvoting, and the odds on which it is based? These are hardly matters routinely communicated to the public by the media or anyone else, which is presumably why so many people do, in fact, vote - and why so many make assidmis efforts to be politically well informed.

From Ignorance to Error

Just as it is so often simply assumed that ignorance is a rational, "knowing" choice, it is usually assumed that the heuristics used by ignorant voters, such as the retrospective or nature-of-the-times heuristic, are *good* substitutes for knowledge (but see Somin 1998, sec. II; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, 155). This assumption is captured in the habit of calling heuristics "information shortcuts": voters, whose time is scarce, are supposed to have figured out that they don't need to master the entirety of the political universe in order to vote intelligently; they can use a given heuristic to reach the same destination (an intelligent vote) more quickly. The problem is that you can't know whether you're taking a shortcut or making a wrong turn unless you already know where the intended destination is. The only guarantee that political heuristics aren't simply shortcuts to error is, again, the implicit assumption that heuristics-wielding voters are effectively omniscient, such that they know which heuristics are good ones.

If our models of politics are to have a place for error, we have to reset the default from knowledge to ignorance and, as Popper and Hayek did, treat knowledge as the epistemic exception. As a rule, no rational being would deliberately make a mistake - ever. Therefore, if in politics people do, in fact, err; and if they are, in fact, instrumentally rational; then their errors must either be due to a defect in their reasoning, or to their inadvertent ignorance of the fact that they are heading in the wrong direction. In short, they must err because they are human beings, often lost in the vastness of the world.

Readers who have been puzzled by the extensive attention that *Critical Review* has paid to rational-choice theory may now, I hope, better understand.[12] If all goes back to the Viennese economist Hayek.

Rational-choice theory is parasitic on orthodox neoclassical economics, which initially assumes godlike, perfect knowledge on the part of economic agents. For this reason, profits and losses, among other economic realities, are anomalous in the orthodox view: no perfectly knowledgeable entrepreneur would incur losses, nor would he fail to compete away another's profits (Kirzner 1997; Friedman 2006b, sec. II). Even when the orthodoxy has been amended to take account of the cost of acquiring information that one *knows* is valuable, radical ignorance, hence error, remain as anomalous in the economic orthodoxy as they are in the rationalist view of political ignorance that has been derived from that orthodoxy.

The deployment of the perfect-knowledge assumption by neoclassical economics has been aptly described in these pages as a triumph of precise, elegant modeling over reality (Boettke 1997) - and it is the principal *casus belli* between "Austrian" economists, such as Hayek, and their orthodox neoclassical colleagues. The Hayekian roots of the journal therefore uniquely suit it to resist economic imperialism, just as its Popperian roots suit it to the study of error.

The economic imperialist characterizes ignorance as the rational choice in a large electorate. This obscures the possibility that voters, even (in their own eyes) "well-informed" voters - indeed, even political elites - who have *not* chosen to be ignorant might, nonetheless, *be* ignorant, inadvertently. Consider, once more, the ideologies that Converse ([1964] 2006, sec. II) explored. In his telling, ideologies are bundles of beliefs that are loosely connected by "crowning postures"; both the postures and the links among them are, Converse suggests, of doubtful validity. *In the mind of the ideologue,* however, the ideology makes sense: indeed, everything the ideologue learns after mastering the ideology seems to confirm how sensible it is. How simple the world becomes! - as long as one selectively perceives it, *ignoring* what the ideology has prepared one to discount as impossible or unlikely, or what it simply hasn't flagged for attention. The ideologue doesn't know whatever her belief in the ideology keeps her from knowing; and one cannot rationally calculate the benefit of knowing what one doesn't know.

Meanwhile, someone who has learned another ideology sees the world very differently. What is "manifest" to one is not obvious to all. When an ideologue notices others' disagreement with his own manifest truths, how does he interpret it?

The opponent has always to be explained, and the last explanation that we ever look for is that he sees a different set of facts…. So where two factions see vividly each its own aspect, and contrive their own explanations of what they see, it is almost impossible for them to credit each other with honesty….

[The opponent] presents himself as the man who says, evil be thou my good. He is an annoyance who does not fit into the scheme of things. Nevertheless he interferes. And since that scheme is based in our minds on incontrovertible fact fortified by irresistible logic, some place has to be found for him in the scheme. Rarely in politics …is a place made for him by the simple admission that he has looked upon the same reality and seen another aspect of it. (Lippmann [1922] 1949, 82-83)

"Out of the opposition," therefore, "we make villains and *conspiracies*" (ibid., 83, emph. added).

This picture sits uncomfortably, at best, with the prettified view of politics that follows from treating knowledge as the default position. Indeed, the ugliest parts of real-world politics may, themselves, have the same starting point as the rational-ignorance theorists' airbrushing of those parts: the starting point of assumed knowledge. The ideologue thinks of his ideology not as an ideology, but as a bundle of obvious truths, *known to all*. Why would the ideologue's opponent advocate the opposite of what "everybody knows"? He must *know what he is wrong* (as conspirators do). But only a villain would knowingly advocate what is wrong.

If we take ignorance in politics as seriously as Popper and Hayek took it in science and economics, then not only the errors in people's political beliefs, but the dogmatism, self-righteousness, paranoia, and vilification that mark political believers may all be illuminated. What is their dogmatism if not ignorance of one's own ignorance? What is self-righteousness if not anger that others are ignoring the "manifest truth"? What is the paranoid tendency, if not the conflation of others' ignorance with their knowing deception? Why vilify one's opponents, if not because the harm they do is intended as such? *Un*intended consequences, not deliberate evil; *well*-intended opponents, not demons; misguided idealists, not knowing utopians; erroneous perceptions, not lies; contestable interpretations, not delusions; and the widespread discounting of these complexities in favor of the commonplace political preoccupation with motives, mendacity, and malevolence - these are only a few of the things that are overlooked if we fail to start with ignorance.

In the current issue, Jon A. Shields examines some of these unpleasant realities; future issues will feature symposia on American presidents as demagogues; on whether dogmatism is cognitive or affective; on Ilya Somin's *The Politics of Ignorance* (forthcoming); and on Caplan's *The Myth of the Rational Voter* (2007). Such topics are rich with normative implications as well as empirical ones.

Popper argued that democracy can achieve good results, despite public ignorance, by means of policy experimentation. Taking Hayek's side in the matter, and (sometimes) John Stuart Mill's, I have used evolutionary psychology to suggest in these pages that error correction is likelier in the private than in the public sphere, due to the greater possibilities for effective private experimentation.[13] Similarly, Somin (1998) has argued that the agenda of democracy must be reduced and localized if there is to be any hope for well-informed public policy in the face of public ignorance. Caplan, however, thinks that public ignorance (of economics) could be remedied by the ministrations of an economically literate elite. David Ciepley (1999), similarly, has argued here for rule by experts - but not necessarily economists. Such recommendations gain added currency with the rise of "the new paternalism" (e.g., Thaler and Sunstein 2003), based on psychological research into *private* ignorance. If not rule by philosopher-kings, or economist-kings, what about rule by psychologist-kings?

What is fairly certain, unfortunately, is that there is all too much empirical fuel for such normative debates. Truculence, indignation, misunderstanding, bias, and disastrous mistake: the list of ignorance-based realities could be extended, and their study is crucial. They threaten our well-being and, now, our very existence. There may never have been a better time to take ignorance seriously than 20 years after this journal started to do so.

Notes

1. I hatched the plan with Dennis Auerbach and Milton Mueller, inspired by Weber's *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* and, more immediately, Paul Piccone's *Telos*. The format, however, was to consist primarily of long review essays, *à la* the *New York Review of Books*, to enable scholars to criticize each other's ideas at length. The first issue appeared in the winter of 1986-87. By 2001, chronic understaffing had caused us to fall so far behind schedule that we skipped two years so as to catch up to the calendar (volume 14 is dated 2000; volume 15, 2003).

2. See, *inter alia,* special issues treating Derrida, Foucault, de Man, and Saussure (vol. 3, no. 1); and Fish, Lyotard, and postmodernism in general (vol. 5, no. 2).

3. Popper's work as a whole treats scientific knowledge as an evolutionary outcome in the metaphorical sense, in which theories better adapted to reality survive experimental challenge. Jarvie 1988, Munz 1988, and O'Hear 1988 discuss the compatibility of Popperianism with the natural selection of sensory apparatus; see also Radnitzky and Bartley, ed., 1987. In complementary fashion, Hayek's work in intellectual history (e.g., Hayek 1952 and 1954) takes it for granted that error, based on ignorance, may also grow over time - presumably because in intellectual history, there is no evolutionary reality check. Later in his career, however - dissatisfied, I suspect, with the increasing irrelevance of "the planning mentality" as a cultural explanation for widespread economic attitudes with which he disagreed - he posited affective rather than cognitive evolutionary explanations (Hayek 1983). I have argued that these must, at the very least, be supplemented by simple ignorance of economics (Friedman 2005, xliv ff.), if not cognitivist evolutionary explanations (Friedman 2006b, sec. V) of what Hayek sought to explain.

4. Lavoie 1987 attempted to extend Austrian insights about economic ignorance into a new understanding of contemporary democracy. Other agenda-setting papers were Halverson 1991 (on state autonomy in modern democracy); Cornuelle 1992 (on the irrelevance, to social democracy, of the Austrians' argument against communism); Maryanski 1995 (on how human evolution bears on human well-being); Prisching 1995 (on public ignorance); Borchert 1996 (on differences between public opinion and elite governing opinion); Greenfeld 1996, Tyrrell 1996, and Weber 1996 (on nationalism as the central heuristic of modern politics); and Boettke 1997 (on the relevance of "Austrian" perspectives even to social democracy).

5. A list of the ground-clearing articles would encompass at least half of the first ten volumes. More selectively, then: Clouatre 1987 challenged the coherence of Hayek's epistemology. Legutko 1990 questioned liberal relativism, as did later contributors. Shibles 1994 and Kuspit 1995 questioned the aesthetic effects of capitalism. Sunstein 1994 emphasized the successes of many piecemeal regulatory interventions. Lane 1994 asked whether wealth increases happiness - a matter subsequently discussed in vol. 10, no. 4. Friedman 1989, 1990, and 1997 tried to dismantle the synthesis of Austrian economics and libertarian philosophy, prompting debates in vol. 6, no. 1 and vol. 12, no. 3. The critique of rational-choice theory began in vol. 9, nos. 1-2. Lewin 1998 began the critique of *public*-choice theory.

Papers debating various Popperian and Hayekian themes are too numerous to mention, but many of them are contained in special issues devoted to Hayek (vol. 3, no. 2 and vol. 11, no. 1) and to both Hayek and Popper (vol. 17, nos. 1-2).

6. See the empirically oriented work of Anderson 1998, Bennett 2003 and 2006, Converse 2006, Fishkin 2006, Graber 2006, Kersh 1998, Kinder 2006, Kuran 1998, Lupia 2006, Popkin 2006, Ravenal 2000, Shapiro 1998, Tetlock 1998, Wawro 2006, and Wilson 1998. On normative implications, see Althaus 2006; Hardin 2006; Posner 2004; and Talisse 2004 and 2006.

7. E.g., Bramwell 2004; Ciepley 1999, 2000, and 2004; DeCanio 2000a, 2000b, 2005, and 2006; Hoffman 1998, 1999, and 2003; Niemi 2003; Salam 2003; Savodnik 2003; Somin 1998, 2000, 2004, and 2006; Upham 2005; and Weinshall 2003.

8. See, e.g., Lord, et al., 1979; Putnam et al., 1979; Converse and Pierce 1986; Lodge and Hamill 1986; Kunda 1987; Jennings 1992; Johnston 1996; Zuwerink and Devine 1996; Lundgren and Prislin 1998; Taber and Lodge 2006.

9. Friedman 2006a, ix-x, and Friedman 2005, xxi-xxv.

10. But see Somin 2006, 257-62.

11. Borrowed from the title of Shapiro 2005.

12. E.g., vol. 9, nos. 1-2, republished, with a revised introduction, as Friedman, ed., 1996.

13. For defenses of Popper's view, see Eidlin 2005 and Notturno 2006. Shearmur 2006 responds to Eidlin; Friedman 2006b, sec. IV, responds to Notturno; ibid., sec. I, sketches the evolutionary-psychology argument.

REFERENCES

1. Althaus, Scott (2006) False Starts, Dead Ends, and New Opportunities in Public Opinion Research.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 75-104.

2. Anderson Jr., Richard D. (1998) The Place of the Media in Popular Democracy.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 481-500.

3. Bennett, Stephen Earl (2003) Is the Public's Ignorance of Politics Trivial?. *Critical Review* **15**:(3-4) , pp. 307-338.

4. Bennett, Stephen Earl (2006) Democratic Competence, Before Converse and After.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 105-142.

5. (Blais, André and Dion, Stephane eds.) (1991) *The Budget-Maximizing Bureaucrat* University of Pittsburgh Press , Pittsburgh

6. Boettke, Peter J. (1997) Where Did Economics Go Wrong? Equilibrium as a Flight from Reality.. *Critical Review* **11**:(1) , pp. 11-64.

7. Borchert, Jens (1996) Welfare-State Retrenchment: Playing the National Card.. *Critical Review* **10**:(1) , pp. 63-94.

8. Bramwell, Austin (2004) Against Originalism: Getting over the U.S. Constitution.. *Critical Review* **16**:(4) , pp. 431-454.

9. Caplan, Bryan (2004) Is Socialism Really 'Impossible'?. *Critical Review* **16**:(1) , pp. 33-52.

10. Caplan, Bryan (2007) *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* Princeton University Press , Princeton

11. Ciepley, David (1999) Democracy Despite Voter Ignorance: A Weberian Reply to Somin and Friedman.. *Critical Review* **13**:(1-2) , pp. 191-227.

12. Ciepley, David (2000) Why the State Was Dropped in the First Place: A Prequel to Skocpol's 'Bringing the State Back In.'. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 157-214.

13. Ciepley, David (2004) Authority in the Firm (and the Attempt to Theorize It Away).. *Critical Review* **16**:(1) , pp. 81-116.

14. Clouatre, Dallas (1987) Making Sense of Hayek.. *Critical Review* **1**:(1) (Winter 1986-87) , pp. 73-79.

15. Converse, Philip E. and Pierce, Roy (1986) *Political Representation in France* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass

16. Converse, Philip E. ([1964] 2006) The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 1-74.

17. Converse, Philip E. (2006) Democratic Theory and Electoral Reality.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 297-330.

18. Cornuelle, Richard (1992) The Power and Poverty of Libertarian Thought.. *Critical Review* **6**:(1) , pp. 1-10.

19. DeCanio, Samuel (2000a) Beyond Marxist State Theory: State Autonomy in Democratic Societies.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 215-236.

20. DeCanio, Samuel (2000b) Bringing the State Back In …Again.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 139-146.

21. DeCanio, Samuel (2005) Murray Edelman on Symbols and Ideology in Democratic Politics.. *Critical Review* **17**:(3-4) , pp. 339-350.

22. DeCanio, Samuel (2006) Mass Opinion and American Political Development.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 143-156.

23. Eidlin, Fred (2006) Popper, Social-Democratic Politics, and Free-Market Liberalism.. *Critical Review* **17**:(1-2) , pp. 25-48.

24. Fiorina, Morris P. (1979) *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* Yale University Press , New Haven

25. Fishkin, James S. (2006) Beyond Polling Alone: The Quest for an Informed Public.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 157-166.

26. Friedman, Jeffrey (1989) The New Consensus: I. The Fukuyama Thesis.. *Critical Review* **3**:(3-4) , pp. 373-410.

27. Friedman, Jeffrey (1990) The New Consensus: II. The Democratic Welfare State.. *Critical Review* **4**:(4) , pp. 633-708.

28. (Friedman, Jeffrey ed.) (1996) *The Rational Choice Controversy* Yale University Press , New Haven

29. Friedman, Jeffrey (1997) What's Wrong with Libertarianism.. *Critical Review* **11**:(3) , pp. 407-463.

30. Friedman, Jeffrey (1998) Public Ignorance and Democratic Theory.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 397-412.

31. Friedman, Jeffrey (2000) After Democracy, Bureaucracy? Rejoinder to Ciepley.. *Critical Review* **14**:(1) , pp. 113-137.

32. Friedman, Jeffrey (2005) Popper, Weber, and Hayek: The Epistemology and Politics of Ignorance.. *Critical Review* **17**:(1-2) , pp. i-lviii.

33. Friedman, Jeffrey (2006a) Democratic Competence in Normative and Positive Theory: Neglected Implications of 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.'. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. i-xliii.

34. Friedman, Jeffrey (2006b) Taking Ignorance Seriously: Rejoinder to Critics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(4) , pp. 469-532.

35. Graber, Doris A. (2006) Government by the People, for the People - Twenty-First Century Style.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 167-178.

36. Gray, John (1984) *Hayek on Liberty* Basil Blackwell , Oxford

37. Greenfeld, Liah (1996) The Modern Religion?. *Critical Review* **10**:(2) , pp. 169-192.

38. Halverson, John (1991) Plato's Republic and Ours.. *Critical Review* **5**:(4) , pp. 453-474.

39. Hardin, Russell (2006) Ignorant Democracy.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 179-198.

40. Hayek, F. A. (1952) *The Sensory Order: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

41. Hayek, F. A. (1952) *The Counter-Revolution of Science: Studies on the Abuse of Reason* The Free Press , New York

42. Hayek, F. A. (idem, Introduction to ed.) (1954) History and Politics.. *Capitalism and the Historians* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

43. Hayek, F. A. (1983) *Knowledge, Evolution, and Society* Adam Smith Institute , London

44. Hoffman, Tom (1998) Rationality Reconceived: The Mass Electorate and Democratic Theory.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 459-480.

45. Hoffman, Tom (1999) Humanism and Antihumanism in Lasch and Sandel.. *Critical Review* **13**:(1-2) , pp. 97-114.

46. Hoffman, Tom (2003) The Quiet Desperation of Dahl's (Quiet) Radicalism.. *Critical Review* **15**:(1-2) , pp. 87-122.

47. Ikeda, Sanford (2003) How Compatible Are Public Choice and Austrian Political Economy?. *Review of Austrian Economics* **16**:(4) , pp. 63-75. [crossref]

48. Jarvie, Ian (1988) Evolutionary Epistemology.. *Critical Review* **2**:(1) , pp. 92-102.

49. Jennings, M. Kent (1992) Ideology among Mass Publics and Political Elites.. *Public Opinion Quarterly* **56** , pp. 419-441. [crossref]

50. Johnston, Lucy (1996) Resisting Change: Information Seeking and Stereotype Change.. *European Journal of Social Psychology* **26** , pp. 799-825. [crossref]

51. Kelman, Steven (1987) *Making Public Policy* Basic Books , New York

52. Kersh, Rogan (1998) Anti-Democratic Demos: The Dubious Basis of Congressional Approval.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 569-584.

53. Kiewiet, D. Roderick (1983) *Macroeconomics and Micropolitics* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

54. Kinder, Donald (2006) Belief Systems Today.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 197-216.

55. Kinder, Donald and Roderick, D. Kiewiet (1981) Sociotropic Politics: The American Case.. *British Journal of Political Science* **11** , pp. 129-161.

56. Kirzner, Israel M. (1997) Entrepreneurial Discovery and the Competitive Market Process: An Austrian Approach.. *Journal of Economic Literature* **35**:(1) , pp. 60-85.

57. Kuklinski, James H. and Quirk, Paul J. (Lupia, Arthur, McCubbins, Matthew D. and Popkin, Samuel L. eds.) (2000) Reconsidering the Rational Public: Cognition, Heuristics, and Mass Opinion.. *Elements of Reason: Cognition, Choice, and the Bounds of Rationality* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

58. Kunda, Ziva (1987) Motivated Inference: Self-Serving Generation and Evaluation of Causal Theories.. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **53**:(4) , pp. 636-647. [crossref]

59. Kuran, Timur (1998) Insincere Deliberation and Democratic Failure.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 529-544.

60. Kuspit, Donald (1995) Art and Capital: An Ironic Dialectic.. *Critical Review* **9**:(4) , pp. 465-482.

61. Lane, Robert E. (1994) The Road Not Taken: Friendship, Consumerism, and Happiness.. *Critical Review* **8**:(4) , pp. 521-554.

62. Lavoie, Don (1987) Political and Economic Illusions of Socialism.. *Critical Review* **1**:(1) (Winter 1986-87) , pp. 1-34.

63. Legutko, Ryszard (1990) Society as a Department Store.. *Critical Review* **4**:(3) , pp. 327-344.

64. Lewin, Leif (1991) *Self-Interest and Public Interest in Western Politics* Oxford University Press , Oxford [crossref]

65. Lewin, Leif (1998) Man, Society, and the Failure of Politics.. *Critical Review* **12**:(1-2) , pp. 1-12.

66. Lippmann, Walter ([1922] 1949) *Public Opinion* Free Press , New York

67. Lodge, Milton and Ruth, Hamill (1986) A Partisan Schema for Political Information Processing.. *American Political Science Review* **80** , pp. 505-519. [crossref]

68. Lord, Charles, Ross, Lee and Lepper, Mark R. (1979) Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence.. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **37**:(11) , pp. 2098-2109. [crossref]

69. Lundgren, Sharon M. and Prislin, Radmilla (1998) Motivated Cognitive Processing and Attitude Change.. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* **24**:(7) , pp. 715-726. [crossref]

70. Lupia, Arthur (2006) How Elitism Undermines the Study of Voter Competence.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 217-232.

71. Maryanski, A. R. (1995) What Is the Good Society for Hominoids?. *Critical Review* **9**:(4) , pp. 483-500.

72. Munz, Peter (1988) Sense Perception and the Reality of the World.. *Critical Review* **2**:(1) , pp. 65-77.

73. Niemi, Alison (2003) Film as Religious Experience: Myths and Models in Mass Entertainment.. *Critical Review* **15**:(3-4) , pp. 435-446.

74. Notturno, Mark Amadeus (2006) Economism, Freedom, and 'The Epistemology and Politics of Ignorance': Reply to Friedman.. *Critical Review* **18**:(4) , pp. 431-452.

75. O'Hear, Anthony (1988) The Evolution of Knowledge.. *Critical Review* **2**:(1) , pp. 78-91.

76. Olson, Mancur (1965) *The Logic of Collective Action: Public Goods and the Theory of Groups* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass

77. Popkin, Samuel L. (1991) *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

78. Popkin, Samuel L. (2006) The Factual Basis of 'Belief Systems': A Reassessment.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 233-254.

79. Popper, Karl ([1957] 1991) *The Poverty of Historicism* Routledge , London

80. Popper, Karl (1963) *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge* Harper & Row , New York

81. Posner, Richard A. (2004) Law, Pragmatism, and Democracy: Reply to Somin.. *Critical Review* **16**:(4) , pp. 465-472.

82. Prisching, Manfred (1995) The Limited Rationality of Democracy: Schumpeter as the Founder of Irrational Choice Theory.. *Critical Review* **9**:(3) , pp. 301-324.

83. Putnam, Robert D., Leonard, R. and Nanetti, R. Y. (1979) Attitude Stability among Italian Elites.. *American Journal of Political Science* **23** , pp. 463-494. [crossref]

84. (Radnitzky, Gerard and Bartley III, W. W. eds.) (1987) *Evolutionary Epistemology, Theory of Rationality, and the Sociology of Knowledge* Open Court , LaSalle, Ill

85. Ravenal, Earl C. (2000) Ignorant Armies: The State, the Public, and the Making of Foreign Policy.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 327-374.

86. Salam, Reihan (2003) Habermas vs. Weber on Democracy.. *Critical Review* **15**:(1-2) , pp. 59-86.

87. Savodnik, Peter (2003) Ernst Cassirer's Theory of Myth.. *Critical Review* **15**:(3-4) , pp. 447-458.

88. Schumpeter, Joseph A. (1950) *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* 3rd ed, Harper & Row , New York

89. Selinger, Evan M. (2003) Feyerabend's Democratic Critique of Expertise.. *Critical Review* **15**:(3-4) , pp. 359-373.

90. Shapiro, Ian (2005) *The Flight from Reality in the Human Sciences* Princeton University Press , Princeton

91. Shapiro, Robert Y. (1998) Public Opinion, Elites, and Democracy.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 501-528.

92. Shearmur, Jeremy (2006) Popper, Political Philosophy, and Social Democracy: Reply to Eidlin.. *Critical Review* **18**:(4) , pp. 361-376.

93. Shibles, Warren (1994) Humanistic Art.. *Critical Review* **8**:(3) , pp. 371-392.

94. Somin, Ilya (1998) Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 413-458.

95. Somin, Ilya (2000) Democracy and Voter Ignorance Revisited: Rejoinder to Ciepley.. *Critical Review* **14**:(1) , pp. 99-112.

96. Somin, Ilya (2004) Posner's Pragmatism.. *Critical Review* **16**:(1) , pp. 1-22.

97. Somin, Ilya (2006) Knowledge about Ignorance: New Directions in the Study of Political Information.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 255-278.

98. Somin, Ilya *The Politics of Ignorance* University of Michigan Press , Ann Arbor

99. Sunstein, Cass R. (1994) On Costs, Benefits, and Regulatory Success: Reply to Crandall.. *Critical Review* **8**:(4) , pp. 623-634.

100. Taber, Charles S. and Lodge, Milton (2006) Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs.. *American Journal of Political Science* **50**:(3) , pp. 755-769. [crossref]

101. Taleb, Nassim Nicholas (2005) *Fooled by Randomness: The Hidden Role of Chance in the Market and in Life* 2nd ed, Random House , New York

102. Taleb, Nassim Nicholas (2007) *The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable* Random House , New York

103. Talisse, Robert B. (2004) Does Public Ignorance Defeat Deliberative Democracy?. *Critical Review* **16**:(4) , pp. 455-464.

104. Talisse, Robert B. (2006) Democracy and Ignorance: Reply to Friedman.. *Critical Review* **18**:(4) , pp. 453-468.

105. Tetlock, Philip E. (1998) The Ever-Shifting Foundations of Democratic Theory: Do Citizens Have the Right Stuff?. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 545-562.

106. Tetlock, Philip E. (2005) *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton University Press , Princeton

107. Thaler, Richard H. and Sunstein, Cass R. (2003) Libertarian Paternalism.. *American Economic Review Papers and Proceedings* **93**:(2) , pp. 175-179. [crossref]

108. Tyrrell, Martin (1996) Nation-States and States of Mind: Nationalism as Psychology.. *Critical Review* **10**:(2) , pp. 233-250.

109. Upham, S. Phineas (2005) Is Economics Scientific? Is Science Scientific?. *Critical Review* **17**:(1-2) , pp. 117-132.

110. Wawro, Gregory J. (2006) The Rationalizing Public?. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 279-296.

111. Weber, Eugen (1996) What Rough Beast?. *Critical Review* **10**:(2) , pp. 285-298.

112. Weinshall, Matthew (2003) Means, Ends, and Public Ignorance in Habermas's Theory of Democracy.. *Critical Review* **15**:(1-2) , pp. 23-58.

113. Wilson, James Q. (1998) Idealizing Politics.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 563-568.

114. Zaller, John (1992) *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

115. Zuwerink, Julia and Devine, Patricia G. (1996) Attitude Importance and Resistance to Persuasion: It's Not Just the Thought that Counts.. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* **70**:(5) , pp. 931-944. [crossref]

Robert S. Erikson

Does Public Ignorance Matter?

Abstract

Recent scholarship has attempted to restore the reputation of the American electorate, even though its level of political interest and information has not measurably increased. Scott Althaus's Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics challenges this revisionist optimism, arguing that opinion polls misrepresent the interests of a large segment of society, and that they therefore get too much attention as a guide to policy makers, because those being polled are so ill informed. But Althaus overestimates the degree to which respondent ignorance is responsible for the instability of survey responses; and he is perhaps too critical of polling as the vehicle for transmitting voter interests. His analysis of information effects on political attitudes, however, raises the important question of how public opinion would be different if it were well informed. The answer is, I believe: only minimally different.

Introduction

What role should public opinion - and public-opinion polls - play in a democracy? This question is the focus of Scott Althaus's thorough and thoughtful *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics* (Cambridge University Press, 2003). Althaus acknowledges that answering it involves addressing several tough ancillary questions: Should we be satisfied with the quality of public opinion? Should politicians rely on the polls? Can we identify plausible prescriptions for improving either public-opinion surveys, or public opinion itself?

The easiest first step might be to paint a picture of what public opinion would look like in an ideal democracy.

All opinions would count equally. All citizens would be well-enough informed that they would understand their own interests (no false consciousness). And it would be nice if different citizens' interests did not clash with each other very much: we would not want our informed citizenry to engage in zero-sum conflicts over competing class and ethnic differences, or over contradictory cultural values. Far better for them to debate how to "grow" and divide an expandable pie. Finally, a general tolerance for all points of view would be preferable.

Who could argue with the desirability of a highly informed, tolerant group of citizens blessed with equal degrees of enlightenment? Meanwhile, however, back in the real world, surveys of public opinion going back more than a half century paint a very different picture. As the authors of such books as *Voting* (Berelson et al., 1954) and *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960)

discovered (and as has been confirmed repeatedly), much of the American public is extremely uninformed and unsophisticated about politics.

In this long tradition of findings, the most relevant to Althaus's book is Philip E. Converse's paper, "The Nature of Beliefs in Mass Publics" ([1964] 2006), with its famous finding that the same survey respondents gave strikingly inconsistent answers to the same policy-preference questions at different times. The pattern Converse described is consistent with the possibility that while a minority holds stable, "real" opinions, the survey responses of most people are random "non-attitudes." Arguably, public ignorance runs so deep that in many cases people formulate "opinions" on the fly (when cornered by a survey researcher), mentally flipping a coin to choose their response.

Converse's 1964 paper, and discussions of its implications, have recently appeared in these very pages (*Critical Review* 18, nos. 1-3), and need not be reviewed here except to note that in most respects, his findings about the electorate's general ignorance still hold true in the twenty-first century. While political elites are more polarized than ever by both party and ideology, most people are oblivious to ideology, because political knowledge has increased at a rate that can, at best, be described as marginal. (Althaus provides a good account of the long-term trends.) Indeed, if we use participation in elections as our gauge of political interest, the U.S. citizenry is even less politically engaged now than in the mid-twentieth century, when the story of the ignorant American electorate was first being written.

Pessimism and Revisionism

The unattractive realities of the typical voter have required a re-evaluation of naïve views about democratic citizens' capabilities. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the pessimistic view was that the survival of democracy depended more on (responsible) elites than upon (ignorant) masses. Expectations had been lowered to plebiscitarian levels, with the best one could hope for being that the electorate would choose its leaders based on the recent performance of competing political parties. Voter capabilities were described as limited to retrospective evaluations of government performance (Fiorina 1981), and voter input on prospective policy was, thankfully, not much in evidence. And it was thought possible that there was no hope for improvement. Althaus (249) quotes Schumpeter's ([1942] 1976) observation that "the typical citizen drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field."

More recent scholarship, which Althaus labels the "revisionist" view, finds reason for optimism. Revisionists do not challenge the earlier assessment of individual citizens' ignorance of politics, nor do they argue that the citizenry has undergone some transformation in recent years. Rather, they offer a different explanation for public ignorance than Schumpeter's contention that people are cognitively challenged when it comes to politics.

For instance, Anthony Downs (1957) influentially argued that, far from being stupid, citizens are rational to "disengage" from politics because they realize that their impact on politics, as

individual voters, is too remote to justify the cost of seeking political information. Thus, a reduction of its costs could both increase the consumption of information and equalize its distribution. Along similar lines, in *The Reasoning Voter,* Samuel L. Popkin ([1991](#)) popularized the notion of limited-information rationality, according to which voters do a good job of arriving at political opinions given the limited information that reaches them.

And what about the instability of survey responses that led to Converse's non-attitudes argument? Subsequent scholarship (Achen [1975](#); Erikson [1979](#)) suggested that the problem was with survey (measurement) error, rather than respondent (randomness) error. The crucial point, to which we return below, is that instability of the survey response varies little with the information level of the respondent - a result that could hardly occur if respondents' ignorance was responsible for their response variation.

Another part of the revisionist view is that the electorate's performance is much better in the aggregate than would be expected from the informational levels and attitudinal instability of the typical voter. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro's *The Rational Public* ([1992](#)) found that when polls show movement in public opinion, the change is predictable and rational rather than arbitrary and capricious. Michael MacKuen, James Stimson, and I (Erikson et al. [2002](#)) present evidence that the electorate as a whole responds to environmental signals, even when it is implausible to think that most voters are attentive to them. For example, voters' collective changes in economic expectations visibly respond not only to their retrospective evaluations of the recent economy, but also to available economic forecasts, such as those compiled in the index of leading economic indicators. Even more astonishingly, we found that the public's aggregate liberalism or conservatism shifts in the opposite direction from recently enacted legislation, whether liberal or conservative, as if homeostatically adjusting to policy movement away from the center.

How can the electorate as a whole be better informed than most individual voters? The usual answer involves the so-called miracle of aggregation, a theory to which Converse ([1990](#)) himself has contributed. In this view, the truly random "errors" (non-attitudes) cancel each other out, leaving attentive voters, no matter how few in number they may be, to account for any macro-level shift in opinion.

Ignorance or Ambivalence?

Althaus's book is offered, in part, as an antidote to overoptimistic revisionism. Consistent with a more "traditionalistic" view, Althaus argues that overreliance on public opinion polls can misdirect policy makers from the true interests of the citizenry, not only because survey responses can be so ill informed that they misrepresent the positions of opinion holders, but because they ignore the interests of non-opinion holders. More specifically, he contends that (1) surveys give *too much* weight to the *responses* of the uninformed; (2) by neglecting the views of those who choose the "no opinion" or "don't know" response, surveys give *too little* weight to the *interests* of the uninformed; (3) as a result, the opinion divisions reported in surveys are often

pulled in the direction of ill-informed opinion, while informed opinion tends to be more evenly split; and therefore (4) if people were to become fully informed (and were thus to adopt the views of similarly situated citizens who are fully informed already), the distributions of fully informed opinion would be different from those reported on the basis of surveys of the uninformed, plus the informed, minus the "don't knows."

Whereas an elitist might shrug and advocate that surveys simply filter out non-opinions and ill-informed opinions, Althaus argues that analyses of surveys conducted in the usual fashion should project what the views of the uninformed would be if they possessed full information. This might appear to be an awkward solution, but Althaus argues that at least it is more realistic than schemes to generate a more informed public, such as are contained in Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter's *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* (1996).

Althaus approaches his subject with expert knowledge of the foibles of opinion polling, excellent statistical instincts, and none of the defensiveness of a survey practitioner. The reader can see an objective scientist at work, as in the frequent instances where he concludes that a nice hypothesis is not supported by the data. But despite my general admiration for the work, as a proud card-carrying "revisionist" my views about the specifics are mixed. Althaus is at his best - which is to say, superb - when the going is most daunting: simulating what he calls "fully informed opinion," and comparing it to the survey results we normally get. But, not unexpectedly, I will quarrel with Chapter 2's dismissal of the "miracle of aggregation." As well, I will contend that the conclusions presented in the final chapter are interesting but somewhat disappointing.

Polls and the Miracle of Aggregation

All who have examined response turnover in panel surveys agree on the following: When the identical survey question is asked more than once in separate interviews at varying times, the degree of response stability does not vary much, if at all, as a function of the time gap between surveys. The irrelevance of the time between interviews as a factor in response turnover can mean only that the underlying latent or "true" opinion among opinion holders must be stable. Thus, we have the very interesting finding that if people have any opinions at all, they rarely change their minds.

Why, then are they changing their responses?

Althaus singles out the ill-informed respondent as the culprit. I disagree. There is no apolitical cohort of randomly behaving non-opinion holders whom we can single out for creating survey mischief. Rather, response instability is a largely a function of measurement error in the questions. Here is why.

The test is whether error is concentrated among apolitical, ignorant, or unsophisticated respondents on the one hand, or is spread evenly across levels of political sophistication on the other. On balance, the data favor the latter interpretation (Achen 1975; Erikson 1979). Recall that

when respondents are asked the same question more than once but on different dates, a change in the survey response is almost always a sign of error, not a change of mind. If this response turnover is a marker for error by ill-qualified respondents, we should expect to see it concentrated among the less politically informed, less politically attentive, and less politically sophisticated respondents. But that is not the observed pattern. Response instability is spread rather evenly across levels of political information, attention, and sophistication. What this must mean is that the questions are sufficiently vague to cause error across all types of respondents.[1] If error is evenly spread across sophistication levels, the good news is that we should not expect that the errors (mis)represent the views of a single group. Therefore, little would be gained from trying to conjure up proxy opinions among non-opinion holders - the difficult and normatively fraught project in which Althaus is engaged.

Of course, if survey error appears at all sophistication levels, it must arise from some source. If it is "measurement error" we might be tempted to blame survey researchers for asking overly vague questions. While this charge is sometimes valid, we should also consider what the even distribution of response error says about the degree of opinion division. Even sophisticated respondents are ambivalent about questions of public policy to the extent they tend to give somewhat flexible answers to the same policy question when asked more than once.

The challenge for survey research is not that survey questions are inherently biased, as Althaus claims, but rather that survey respondents' ambivalence allows their answers to be swayed by subtle aspects of question wording. For instance, a question about some government project will draw more support if the question emphasizes the value of the project than if it emphasizes the taxes to pay for it. (The best solution is to ask questions that do both.) Among pollsters, the preferred way to ascertain public sentiment on some question of policy is well understood: they must ask a battery of questions with slight variation in content, and observe the range of public attitudes that result.[2] And to ascertain the all-important matter of changes in aggregate opinion, the key is simply to be sure to ask the identical question over time, avoiding even slight variations that could produce a different stimulus masquerading as a shift in mass opinion.

To summarize, panel respondents often change their responses from one survey wave to the next, but this response turnover is almost always attributable to survey error, since respondents' latent opinions remain very stable. If the miracle of aggregation holds true (Althaus is skeptical), these errors cancel out at the macro level, leaving observed aggregate opinion unaffected - as long as the observed responses are answers to the same question asked at different times. (The resultant small changes in reported opinion measured at the aggregate level contain a distilled residue of true change that is largely free of response error.)[3] The paradox is the presence of seemingly large error at the macro level of the individual survey response, but seemingly little error at the macro level of the aggregate survey response. But, to be clear, *this* type of "error" lies in not knowing the "right" way to answer an ambiguous question. It is not evidence of either nonattitudes or of poorly informed ones.

People's Survey Responses vs. Their Interests

That said, however, the underlying opinions that voters may have trouble expressing unambiguously could still be woefully underinformed. It is conceivable, for instance, that people generally have opinions about matters of public policy, but that their opinions, and their survey responses, are so steeped in ignorance that they are at odds with their interests. We can therefore ask how people's opinions would change if they knew their own (enlightened) interests rather than being based on false consciousness.

Interesting though this question is, it treads into the area of subjective and normative concerns with perhaps only a loose connection to objective "science." As a case in point, consider the decidedly non-wealthy worker who states approval for tax cuts for the rich. Should we insist that such a respondent misunderstands her own interests? While undoubtedly adversely affected in the short run by enactment of the proposed tax policy, our subject might counter that she aspires to be rich some day; that the benefits will trickle down; that tax cuts are supply-side stimulants, and that a rising tide lifts all boats; that the rich have a right to keep their hard-earned wealth; that the rich are more deserving; etc.

Such considerations could stop us from trying to analyze the effects of political ignorance. Or we could be bold and make assumptions about true-self interest in order to estimate the disconnect, if any, between voiced opinions and the opinions people would hold if they were maximally informed. Althaus dares to take this step. By necessity, it requires him to make certain assumptions.

His driving assumption is that if citizens become informed, they would choose the same policy choices as better-informed citizens who share their demographic characteristics. The idea is that if ordinary citizens were to rise to the same level of information as those scoring at the top of the survey researcher's information scale, they would adopt the policy positions of those at the top of the scale. For instance, poor people would adopt positions regarding regressive tax proposals that reflect the views of poor people who are highly informed. Similarly, the ignorant rich would presumably see things in the same way as do the informed rich.

Althaus estimates what these opinion shifts would be on a variety of topics, using data from the 1988, 1992, and 1996 American National Election Studies (ANES). He controls for a variety of background characteristics - including but not limited to race, gender, religion, region, income, education, and age - plus information levels and the interactions between the background characteristics and information levels. The result is a set of multivariate logistic regression equations predicting opinions from these variables. Using these equations as predictors, Althaus simulates the opinions of the respondents if they were at the top information level.[4]

The simulations are well done, as good as could be accomplished within the limits of the data. Althaus's major point is that simulated informed opinion tends to be somewhat different from the opinion divisions evident in opinion surveys. Across several issues, he displays the sometimes sizable differences between observed opinion and the opinions that would result from full information.

However, the "information effects" discovered by Althaus tend to be irregular. For instance, with full information the electorate would be more pro-choice on abortion. Similarly, the informed electorate is much less enthusiastic about "school prayer" than is observed opinion. Yet on "morality" issues more generally, there are few differences between observed and fully informed opinion. On economic issues the informed electorate is more supportive of free-market solutions and opposed to government services. Yet the informed electorate is also more supportive of taxation. Not only would "full information" push redistributive preferences generally rightward; the biggest push would be among the poor, perhaps unexpectedly. (More intuitively, Althaus estimates that more information would make high-income people more economically conservative.) The net result of greater awareness would not simply be a more conservative electorate economically, but also one with smaller class divisions. This is far from the vision of liberal reformers.

Althaus is properly cautious about the limits of his simulations. Do the views of the fully informed actually represent the enlightened opinions of people within their demographic grouping? For example, holding other characteristics constant, do both highly informed and less informed citizens at the identical point on the income ladder have the same economic interests? Could there be key omitted variables? Or could it be that informed and uninformed citizens who are otherwise alike arrive at different answers to survey questions for the reason that they respond to different expectations about the "correct" response expected of them? There are other possible problems as well. Maybe even more information would change the views of the "fully" informed.

Public Opinion as a Guide to Policy?

If there is one central theme repeated throughout *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics,* it is a critique of the argument that the polls should dictate public policy. One could hardly disagree with Althaus on this point. And, indeed, hardly anyone *has* disagreed on this point. The only writing that Althaus cites as seriously arguing for the primacy of polls is a long forgotten, self-serving tract coauthored by pollster George Gallup in 1940 (Gallup and Rae 1940). If there is a normative argument to the effect that government "should" follow the polls blindly, Althaus does not explicate it.

The argument for the importance of the polls and public opinion follows not from some inherent wisdom captured by opinion surveys (although collective public opinion may often be right). Rather, the voice of the people can check the errors and the self-indulgences of potentially irresponsible leaders. The public does this via elections - a process that receives too little attention from Althaus. The public throws the bums out when government policy is transparently harmful. Almost as importantly, at election time the public can choose among the candidates' future policy positions. Politicians, knowing that the public holds this power, are capable of responding to the polls with their actions between elections.

The final chapter offers some hand-wringing about the appropriate interpretation of opinion surveys. For instance, should we weigh fully informed opinion over observed opinion? In terms of knowing the relevant public opinion, it is true that some opinions should count more than others. These may be the opinions of the most knowledgeable, as Althaus contends; but the crucial ingredient of what counts as relevant opinions is that they influence voting decisions - and/or that politicians think that they do. The full story of information effects will include the effect of information on voting decisions. Therefore, Althaus's book whets the appetite for learning whether full information could induce greater turnout. And how would more information affect the electorate's collective voting decisions?

As Althaus's book makes clear, democracy works best to the degree to which the public is attentive and enlightened to its own interests. The challenge is how this improvement is to be accomplished.

Table 1. Response Instability and Information Levels

	Low Information	High Information
	(N=249)	(N=246)
Identical response, both waves	34%	38%
Response shift of one point	33%	46%
Response shift of 2-6 points	33%	23%

Notes

1. A simple example will help: an example of response turnover from the 2004 ANES survey. In both the pre- and post-election wave, respondents were asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale where 1 = "government should provide many fewer services, reducing spending a lot," and 7 = "government should perform many more services, increasing government spending a lot." This is a standard ANES question that taps a central component of the liberal-conservative dimension. We can array patterns of response consistency by information, using a simple 0-4 information scale regarding respondent knowledge of the jobs of the following people, presented in increasing order of recognition: Richard Cheney, Tony Blair, William Rehnquist, and Dennis Hastert. For simplicity of presentation, compare the low-information respondents, defined as those identifying no more than one (typically Cheney) of these people, with high-information respondents, defined as those who identify at least three (typically Cheney, Blair, Rehnquist, and maybe Hastert).

Predictably, the high-information respondents were more likely to answer both questions (89 percent versus 69 percent). Among those who offered a response to both questions, we see, with percentages reading down the columns, that the high-information respondents were more consistent. But the tendency is not great. With almost as much inconsistency among high-information respondents as low-information respondents, it would be difficult to say that the

overall pattern of inconsistent responses is due to ignorant respondents. A more likely source is that people don't see numerical points on a seven-point scale from exactly the same perspective from one interview to the next.

2. The standard source on question wording is Schuman and Presser 1981.

3. This discussion ignores the possibility of changing responses in successive survey samples due to sampling error. Observed changes in opinion represent true change plus error due to the vagaries of survey sampling, but are largely unaffected by individual-level measurement error in the survey instrument.

4. Althaus's procedure is very similar to Larry Bartels's simulation of the voting behavior people would display if they were fully informed. Whereas Althaus projects people's opinions if informed, Bartels (1996) projects their votes if informed.

REFERENCES

1. Achen, Christopher (1975) Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response.. *American Political Science Review* **69** , pp. 1218-1231. [crossref]

2. Althaus, Scott (2003) *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

3. Bartels, Larry (1996) Uninformed Votes: Information Effects in Presidential Elections.. *American Journal of Political Science* **40**:(1) , pp. 194-230. [crossref]

4. Berelson, Bernard, Lazarsfeld, Paul and McPhee, William (1954) *Voting* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

5. Campbell, Angus, Converse, Philip E., Miller, Warren E. and Stokes, Donald E. (1960) *The American Voter* Wiley , New York

6. Converse, Philip E. ([1964] 2006) The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 1-74.

7. Converse, Philip E. (Ferejohn, John and Kuklinksi, James H. eds.) (1990) Popular Representation and the Distribution of Information.. *Information and Democratic Processes* University of Illiniois Press , Urbana

8. Carpini, Michael X. Delli and Keeter, Scott (1996) *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* Yale University Press , New Haven

9. Downs, Anthony (1957) *An Economic Theory of Democracy* Harper and Row , New York

10. Erikson, Robert (1979) The SRC Panel Data and Mass Attitudes.. *British Journal of Political Science* **9** , pp. 89-114.

11. Erikson, Robert S., MacKuen, Michael B. and Stimson, James A. (2002) *The Macro Polity* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

12. Fiorina, Moris (1981) *Retrospective Voting in American National Elections* Yale University Press , New Haven

13. Gallup, George and Rae, Saul (1940) *The Pulse of Democracy: The Public Opinion Poll and How it Works* Greenwood Press , New York

14. Page, Benjamin I. and Shapiro, Robert Y. (1992) *The Rational Public* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

15. Popkin, Samuel L. (1991) *The Reasoning Voter: Communication and Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

16. Schuman, Howard and Presser, Stanley (1981) *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments in Question Form, Wording, and Content* Academic Press , New York

17. Schumpeter, Joseph ([1942] 1976) *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy* Harper and Row , New York

List of Tables

Table 1. Response Instability and Information Levels

	Low Information (N=249)	High Information (N=246)
Identical response, both waves	34%	38%
Response shift of one point	33%	46%
Response shift of 2-6 points	33%	23%

Benjamin I. Page

Is Public Opinion an Illusion?

Abstract

George Bishop's The Illusion of Public Opinion does a superb job of showing how various errors and malfeasances in conducting and interpreting surveys have created illusions about public opinion. It thereby offers a very useful compendium on how to do, and especially how not to do, survey research. Nothing in the book, however, provides persuasive evidence for either of two more troubling "illusion" arguments: that collective public preferences on policy issues do not exist; or that surveys cannot measure them. Instead, Bishop's examples show that even in obscure, low-information situations, well-designed survey questions generally reveal meaningful collective policy preferences that are coherent, well differentiated, and reflective of citizens' basic interests and values.

Introduction

George Bishop's recent book, *The Illusion of Public Opinion* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2005), is a delight to read, at least for those who enjoy horror stories. It deserves close attention from anyone interested in public opinion. It offers a treasure trove of information on how - and how not - to conduct and interpret survey research. In lively, fast-moving prose that draws upon his own extensive research into survey methodology, Bishop gives detailed real-world examples of practically everything that can go wrong in conducting or interpreting political-opinion polls: fabricating data; asking hopelessly biased questions; talking about "trends" without asking identical repeated questions; using tangled wording that confuses respondents; offering incomplete lists of response alternatives; omitting or misunderstanding status quo/middle-of-the-road responses; ignoring the effects of question order and question context; overinterpreting (and not probing) assent to vaguely worded statements of sentiment; accepting at face value respondents' expressed "reasons" for their opinions; failing to note the firmness or mushiness of opinions; and much more.

As Bishop turns over countless rotten logs in the groves of survey research and reveals the squirming creatures beneath, the implications are sometimes amusing but often painful. Especially so are the hits Bishop scores against such prominent researchers as Norman Nie and even Philip E. Converse (for ignoring the effects of differences in question wording over time, and between the mass public and elites); against journalists who outrageously overinterpret survey data; and against misreadings of public opinion that directly affect public policy, as with the illusory evidence of support for privatizing Social Security, or with the made-up findings with which Frank Luntz sold what would become the 1994 "Contract With America."

In most of the cases that Bishop describes, however, the sophisticated producer or consumer of survey research is likely to come to something like the following conclusion: "Too bad that those journalists [or politicians, or pollsters, or scholars] messed up. But *we know how to do it right*, and we usually do." Certainly that is my own reaction.

In 1992, for example, the normally reliable Roper Organization asked a key question (in a survey sponsored by the American Jewish Committee) that contained a confusing double negative: "Does it seem possible or does it seem impossible to you that the Nazi extermination of the Jews never happened?" Based on the responses to this question, headlines proclaimed that a third of the American public believed that the Holocaust might never have happened. A year later a careful Gallup experiment replicated that result, but it showed that a better question produced no more than 13 percent Holocaust skeptics, and probably fewer (146-47). We can easily avoid such misleading results by fielding properly worded questions.

Most pollsters and newspaper readers (though perhaps not all journalists) have the wit to avoid - or to discount the results of - blatantly one-sided survey questions like those asked about stem-cell research in 2001 for the Juvenile Diabetes Research Foundation ("… from excess human embryos …donated to research …to cure such diseases as diabetes, Parkisnson's, Alzheimer's, cancer …") and for the National Conference of Catholic Bishops ("… the basic cells from which all of a person's tissues and organs develop …live embryos would be destroyed in their first week …using your federal tax dollars …"). The sponsors of the first poll could trumpet 65 percent public support for stem-cell research, while the Catholic bishops found 70 percent opposition (39-45). We can do better than this. We know how to ask neutral or at least balanced questions. Indeed, Bishop himself reports on several reasonably good stem-cell research questions asked in 2001. Though the debate was new and opinions were presumably not fully crystallized, all the better-designed questions produced similar results. Omitting "don't know" responses (which varied widely among survey houses), roughly two-thirds of Americans with opinions favored stem-cell research (ABC, 66 percent; NBC 73 percent; Gallup's short question, 70 percent; Harris, 61 percent [recalculated from 42-44]).

Again, we know how to avoid the sort of mess produced by the 2002 Zogby poll in Ohio concerning the teaching of "intelligent design" in public schools (159-65). Naturally, in response to questions about whether teachers should teach "only Darwin's theory," or "also the scientific evidence against it," and whether, when Darwin's theory is taught, students "should also be able to learn" about "scientific evidence that points to an intelligent design of life," very large majorities of Ohioans favored teaching all the relevant scientific evidence. But that result, and the newspaper headlines reporting it, almost certainly overstated support for teaching "intelligent design," especially in those early days when very few respondents (only 14 percent, according to the Ohio Poll) knew what it was, or whether any scientific evidence for it existed. When the Ohio Poll and Mason-Dixon defined the concept of "intelligent design" for respondents, most recognized it as basically religious. Only about one-quarter saw it as a "completely valid account of how humans were developed," though nearly another 50 percent saw it - ambiguously - as "somewhat valid." In this case, even the best surveys - to say nothing of journalistic reporting - could easily have been improved.

Much the same point applies to Bishop's many other examples of clumsy research or erroneous interpretation. It is a bad idea to bombard respondents with long lists of possible issue priorities, or to do so without rotating them (48, 65); to forget that preferences for "middle" or status-quo options may be inflated by uncertain respondents (57); to ignore the effects of question placement and context (63, 64); to neglect the fact that "most important problem" responses are strongly affected by recent media stories (110); to miss the impact of the number and nature of alternatives in "liberal-conservative" self ratings (117); or to ignore how partisanship and transient events affect presidential approval ratings, measures of trust in government, and the like (124-36).

In each of these cases we know how to do things right. Hence my contention that, by criticizing everything that can go wrong, Bishop provides a highly useful guide to the proper conduct and interpretation of survey research on political attitudes. Many journalists, especially, could learn a great deal from his account.

But improving survey research and its interpretation (for which he does offer some constructive suggestions) does not appear to be Bishop's chief aim. Instead, he seems to suggest that most or all poll-measured public opinion and collective policy preferences are "illusory." On that point I think he is fundamentally incorrect.

Indeed, Bishop's own evidence contradicts the two most troubling versions of the "illusion" argument.

Public Ignorance and the "Illusion" of Public Opinion

The title of Bishop's book - *The Illusion of Public Opinion* - signals a sweeping argument that is echoed in some passages in the text. Bishop asserts that survey respondents manufacture reactions to opinion questions, and that the aggregate products of this manufacturing process are "often illusory" (xv). Moreover, polls on controversial issues "frequently give a rather spurious impression" of what the questions are actually measuring (ibid.), and "often create a misleading illusion of public opinion" as a result of ambiguous question wording and poor media interpretation (xvi). Thus, the survey instrument "frequently generates the conceptual equivalent of an optical illusion" (17). In the book's preface, Bishop declares his thesis to be that "a fair amount of what passes as 'public opinion' in mass media polls today represents an illusion, an artifact of measurement" (xvi). In the conclusion he asserts that "on numerous public affairs issues …respondents are often generating illusory opinions" (187).

On the other hand, Bishop acknowledges in a section heading that "It's Not All Just an Illusion" (111), and he derides the "nonsensical notion" that he is saying that "most polls are just producing an illusion or that Americans have no real opinions on public affairs" (187). Moreover, he is somewhat ambiguous about exactly which of three possible claims he is making: (1) that existing poll questions and journalistic interpretations of the results are often grossly misleading; (2) that a Heisenberg-like uncertainty principle generally makes it impossible to

measure opinions through surveys (see Bishop 2006); or (3) that public opinion on political issues often does not exist. (1) is surely correct. My objection is to points (2) and (3).

The objectionable parts of Bishop's argument seem to rest upon two fundamental propositions: first, that on many policy issues, much of the time, most Americans are too ignorant of relevant information to hold meaningful opinions; and second that, therefore, the on-the-spot, doorstep answers people give to survey interviewers reflect either general attitudes or information provided in the questions, not independently held opinions on specific policy issues.

However, many of Bishop's examples (like stem-cell research) involve particularly obscure, complicated, or newly introduced issues on which the average American is exceptionally poorly informed. Often Bishop produces, as his trump card, a dramatic, survey-based demonstration that very large numbers of respondents - 84 percent in the "intelligent design" case - admit (when they are encouraged to do so) that they don't know anything about a key concept, or haven't followed an issue, or "don't know" which policy alternative they favor. Bishop does not seem to be aware that evidence of substantial ignorance, inattention, or uncertainty *among individuals* may not be relevant to the existence or nonexistence of collective public opinion. At a minimum, such evidence is not conclusive.

There are good reasons to expect that even very poorly informed citizens can often form policy preferences in harmony with their basic values, interests, and beliefs, by taking cues from others - friends, co-workers, pundits, political leaders - whom they trust to share those values and beliefs. That is, a political division of labor - including processes of collective deliberation that can take into account the best available information - often permits individual citizens to adopt sensible policy preferences without having to absorb a mass of information and interpretation that would support those preferences (Page and Shapiro 1992, 362-66, 390-97). Many scholars have studied processes of cue-giving, heuristics-using, political reasoning, opinion leadership, social networks, and collective deliberation that can make this division of labor work.

Thus, respondents' reliance on "general attitudes" or "underlying dispositions" to formulate policy preferences, which Bishop dismisses as often producing "illusory" public opinion (xv), can instead be seen as a sensible use of heuristics and of underlying goals and values to develop specific preferences. For example, *The Foreign Policy Disconnect* (Page with Bouton 2006) shows in detail how individuals' foreign-policy goals, threat perceptions, and the like tend to shape their foreign-policy preferences. Even on-the-spot expressions of preference based on interviewers' descriptions of a little-known policy issue can illuminate quite real - if nascent or latent - public opinion. That is, they can indicate how the public probably *will* react to a very new or particularly obscure issue once collective deliberation has occurred - assuming, of course, that pollsters describe the policy issues accurately and mention pro and con arguments in a balanced fashion. (Those who ask stupid questions sometimes get stupid answers.) The more careful survey researchers learned a lot about latent opinion on stem-cell research, for example, even in the very early stages of debate. Much the same is true of Bishop's other leading examples, including Social Security privatization, a national missile defense, and other issues that I will discuss shortly.

Not only are low levels of information often irrelevant to the existence of collective public opinion; so are high levels of uncertainty about policy alternatives, as manifested in frequent "don't know" or "not sure" responses; instability over time in individuals' expressed preferences; extreme sensitivity of responses to question wording; and the like. After "don't knows" are set aside, the process of statistical aggregation from individual opinions to collective opinion can wash out random fluctuations in responses - so long as they are independent of each other - and can produce good estimates of the real, long-term preferences of the collective public. That is, uncertain responses that deviate in one direction or another from individuals' true long-term preferences can cancel each other out in the aggregate (Page and Shapiro 1992, 15-27).

To be sure, Scott Althaus (2003), Adam Berinsky (2004), and others have shown that simply setting aside "don't knows" and averaging in the responses of the uncertain can bias estimates of collective public opinion against citizens with the least information and the most uncertainty, if those people have distinctive values and interests - if, for example, they have lower incomes than most people. Normatively speaking, for poll-measured collective policy preferences to be a fully legitimate input into political decision making, we need to correct for such biases. However, the biases are usually rather small, and standard poll-based measures of public opinion suffer less from SES biases than do various types of political participation, including voting turnout.

It is also true that sometimes, many people's preferences can be misled in the same direction at the same time, for example by deceptive rhetoric from high government officials or others that is transmitted to everyone through the mass media (especially, I would argue, on certain foreign policy issues when the executive branch exerts information control and/or there is bipartisan collusion, so that no prominent news sources dissent.) Such manipulation of opinion can seriously undermine the normative status of public opinion. Democracy does not mean much if decision makers act in harmony with opinion that they themselves (or organized interest groups) create.

Still, none of these concerns about the normative status of poll-measured collective public opinion implies that public opinion is an "illusion." Even if it is biased or erroneous (and setting aside the fact that most of the bias and error seems to be small, infrequent, and/or correctable), poll-measured public opinion is generally quite *real*. Empirically, it appears to have a number of desirable properties that Bishop's examples only confirm.

Meaningful Public Opinion

In *The Rational Public*, Robert Shapiro and I used data from more than a thousand policy preference questions that had been asked in hundreds of surveys over half a century to show that Americans' collective policy preferences concerning a wide range of issues are not only "real," and satisfactorily measured by polls and surveys, but have a number of properties that make them worth paying attention to.

Collective preferences are generally stable: they usually change only in reasonable response to

political events or new information, and rarely do they fluctuate erratically. They also tend to be differentiated (making many meaningful distinctions); consistent (not displaying logical contradictions); coherent (fitting into a well-structured pattern); and reflective of the average American's basic interests and values (Page and Shapiro 1992, esp. xi, 1, 17, 383-90, and 397-98). More recently, in *The Foreign Policy Disconnect*, Marshall Bouton and I have argued that since collective foreign-policy preferences have these characteristics, and since individual Americans tend to hold logically coherent "purposive belief systems" (in which policy preferences flow from foreign-policy goals and values, the international threats they perceive, their beliefs and feelings about particular foreign countries, and the like), U.S. foreign policy would be better and more sustainable if our decision makers paid more attention to what surveys say the American public wants.

To me, one of the most striking aspects of Bishop's book is that the evidence presented - notwithstanding the book's title - strongly supports such "rational public" views of poll-measured policy preferences.

All five of Bishop's major policy examples (peacekeeping in Liberia, stem-cell research, Social Security privatization, missile defense, and intelligent design) illustrate that, even for very obscure policies and very low-information situations, carefully designed polls can illuminate a well-structured collective public opinion, actual or nascent.

Consider the very first example in the book, that of a possible peacekeeping operation in Liberia in July, 2003 (xiii-xv.) Surely Bishop is right that few Americans had more than a dim idea of what was going on in Liberia at that time or even where the country was; most respondents probably had to depend upon general predispositions and information contained in the survey questions themselves to come up with policy preferences. Yet the overall pattern of responses to multiple questions is quite enlightening. Most Americans were receptive to U.S. participation *if* it was multilateral ("along with troops from other countries"); *if* not too many U.S. troops were involved (reactions to the idea of "two thousand" troops, "one thousand," or "about a hundred" differed significantly); *if* it did not last too long ("for a few months or less," as vs. "for a year or more"); and especially *if* some facts about the situation and the rationale were presented, as one survey question did. In that case, a majority even favored sending a thousand troops, to "enforce" a UN-brokered cease-fire in the civil war (xiii-xiv). That looks to me like real, well-differentiated, sensible collective public opinion.

Bishop acknowledges that in the case of Liberia, Americans "seemed" tuned in to the nuances of what U.S. policy commitments should be, but then he launches into the illusion argument, based on the fact that only 13 percent, in one poll, said they had followed the news about Liberia very closely, making it likely that most people picked up on cues from the questions and used "general attitudes" to construct answers. That is no bar to meaningful public opinion. Relevant general attitudes, including values and beliefs concerning the costs and benefits of various types of peacekeeping operations abroad (which could draw upon historical experiences with similar situations), were clearly sufficient to enable respondents to come up with sensible answers.

Similarly, in 2000 and early 2001, proposals for the partial privatization of Social Security had

barely hit the radar screens of average Americans. Yet even at that early stage, survey data were sufficient to make the shape of public opinion clear to the discerning consumer of polls. True, when some survey questions attached politicians' names ("President Bush has made a proposal … ") to policy alternatives, many respondents picked up on the partisan cues - a perfectly reasonable thing to do. True, also, that one-sided questions about giving workers a "choice" about (or "allowing" them to) invest some of their Social Security taxes produced results that were widely and misleadingly interpreted as support for privatization. But more balanced questions made it clear that stock-market risk was a worrisome consideration for most people. Most important, any indication that guaranteed benefits would be correspondingly reduced generated strong opposition to privatization (33-36). This clearly foreshadowed the policy train wreck to come in 2005. (For even earlier data suggesting public skepticism about privatization, see Page 2000.)

Bishop makes much of the fact that in 2000, about a quarter of survey respondents, even highly educated ones, could be gulled into expressing a view on the entirely fictitious "1995 Social Security Reform Act" (30-32). Quite aside from the fact that a healthy three-quarters of Americans acknowledged that they had no opinion or had not heard of the alleged law, this tells us nothing about "illusions" concerning real policy issues. It just shows once again that some respondents, trusting survey researchers more than they perhaps should, are willing to use whatever cues they can gather from questions to form responses (the "imputed meaning hypothesis"). This can lead to sensible responses if people are asked sensible questions. And even responses about very obscure policies can be meaningful (see Schuman and Presser 1991, 153-60). The same points apply to Bishop's example of the fictitious "1975 Public Affairs Act" (25-30).

Bishop's third major case - that of attitudes toward a national missile defense system, as surveyed in the winter and spring of 2000 (37-39) - also reveals the outlines of coherent public opinion, though again at an early, low-information stage. The public's differing collective responses to very different survey questions do not really illustrate how "malleable" public opinion was, or how respondents could be "coaxed" into saying almost anything (38, 39); instead, they reveal which considerations were important to people, and hence where public opinion was likely to head once a more specific proposal, and more information about it, came to light in debate. Most Americans liked the general idea and wanted to continue researching it, but did not want to spend too much or to deploy the system before it worked; and most wanted to avoid a confrontation with the Russians or a new arms race.

We have already seen that in Bishop's fourth policy case, stem-cell research, relatively well-designed surveys correctly ascertained that a substantial majority of Americans favored federal funding of fetal stem cell research, despite very low levels of information among most citizens. And as for Bishop's fifth and final major example, the teaching of "intelligent design" (159-65), one may not agree with the public's receptiveness (judging it at least "somewhat valid") to a theory that most acknowledged to be basically religious rather than scientific. Personally, I agree with the public on most issues but disagree on this one. Still, Americans' religiosity is a reality, not a poll-driven illusion.

Bishop's book does a superb job of showing how various errors and malfeasances in conducting or interpreting surveys have created illusions *about* public opinion. It offers a very useful compendium on how to do, and how not to do, survey research. Nothing in the book, however, provides persuasive evidence for either of the more troubling "illusion" arguments: that collective public preferences on policy issues do not exist, or that well-designed surveys cannot measure them.

REFERENCES

1. Althaus, Scott L. (2003) *Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

2. Berinsky, Adam J. (2004) *Silent Voices: Public Opinion and Political Participation in America* Princeton University Press , Princeton

3. Bishop, George F. (2005) *The Illusion of Public Opinion: Fact and Artifact in American Public Opinion Polls* Rowman and Littlefield , Lanham, Md.

4. Bishop, George F. (2006) The Illusion of Public Opinion: Synopsis and Prognosis.. Paper delivered at the annual meetings of the American Political Science Association Philadelphia

5. Page, Benjamin I. (Burke, Sheila, Kingson, Eric and Reinhardt, Uwe eds.) (2000) Is Social Security Reform Ready for the American Public?. *Social Security and Medicare: Individual vs. Collective Risk and Responsibility* National Academy of Social Insurance , Washington, D.C.

6. Page, Benjamin I. and Bouton, Marshall M. (2006) *The Foreign Policy Disconnect: What Americans Want from Our Leaders but Don't Get* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

7. Page, Benjamin I. and Shapiro, Robert Y. (1992) *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

8. Schuman, Howard and Presser, Stanley (1981) *Questions and Answers in Attitude Surveys: Experiments on Question Form, Wording, and Context* Academic Press , New York

Stephen Miller

Conservatives and Liberals on Economics: Expected Differences, Surprising Similarities

Abstract

As might be expected, self-identified liberals (and to a lesser extent, self-identified Democrats) are more likely than conservatives to hold anti-free market views. Liberals are more likely to support wage and price controls and the nationalization of industries, and are generally more hostile to business and profits. Less expectedly, while conservatives hold free-market views relative to liberals, conservatives don't hold such views in any absolute sense. They often support the same economic measures as liberals, but by less decisive margins.

Introduction

Political scientists have a long tradition of studying public opinion on a wide variety of issues, but the public's economic beliefs have received only a small amount of the researchers' attention. This may be because political scientists, who tend to be ideologically liberal (Klein and Stern 2005), essentially share the general public's views about economics, rendering them matters of "common sense" rather than objects of interesting research. Since a good portion of public debate is centered on economic issues, however, it is important to understand just what the public believes about these questions.

This study examines the relationship between ideology and economic beliefs, and to a lesser extent the relationship between party identification and economic beliefs. It shows that while liberals are somewhat more anti-free market than conservatives, conservatives are not very pro-free market. And despite the important distinction between ideology and party identification, with only a few exceptions, self-identified Democrats and Republicans are similar to, respectively, self-identifed liberals and conservatives in their economic beliefs.

Differences between Conservatives and Liberals

The General Social Survey (Davis et al., 2005), on which my analysis is based, shows an average ideological self-identification just a shade to the conservative side of "moderate," and a plurality of respondents (39 percent) considered themselves to be moderates. Twenty-seven percent of the respondents considered themselves to be liberal, but of those, less than one in ten (2.6 percent of the total number of respondents) considered themselves "extremely liberal." Thirty-four percent of all respondents considered themselves conservative, but of those, fewer than one in ten (3 percent of the total) called themselves "extremely conservative." Party identification had a

different pattern, with self-identified Democrats (38 percent) barely outnumbering the independents (35 percent), but dwarfing the Republicans (27 percent).

The GSS asked many questions about political and economic beliefs, which I have narrowed down to the 22 that best seem to address attitudes about "free markets." The effect of both ideology and political party affiliation on the answers to each question were estimated using ordered logits, subject to controls for age, sex, race, education, financial situation and perceived job security (Table 1). Where data were available for multiple survey years, the year of the survey was also added as a control. (The surveys were conducted from 1972 to 2004, but as Table 2 suggests, there was little variation in the results over time.) These controls were designed to filter out any effects on economic beliefs caused by differences in income, job security, education, and so on, which might bias the estimated effects of the independent variables: ideology and party.

Table 1. Control Variables

variable	mean

1. 1 if male, 0 if female.

2. "What race do you consider yourself?" 1 if black, 0 other.

3. "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?" 0 = strong Democrat; 1 = not very strong Democrat; 2 = independent, close to Democrat; 3 = independent; 4 = independent, close to Republican; 5 = not very strong Republican; 6 = strong Republican.

4. "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal - point 1 - to extremely conservative - point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?" 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

5. "During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same?" 1 = getting worse, 2 = stayed the same, 3 = getting better.

6. "Thinking about the next 12 months, how likely do you think it is that you will lose your job or be laid off - very likely, fairly likely, not too likely, or not at all likely?" 1 = very likely; 2 = fairly likely; 3 = not too likely; 4 = not at all likely.

7. Years of schooling completed.

Source: Derived from General Social Survey variable identifiers age, sex, race, partyid, polviews, realing, finalter, joblose, educ, and wordsum. See Davis et al. 2005.

Age	45.21
Sex (male)[1]	.44

Table 1.   Control Variables

variable	mean
Race (percent white)[2]	.83
Political party[3]	2.65
Ideology[4]	4.10
Financial situation[5]	2.18
Job security assessment[6]	3.49
Education[7]	12.54

Table 2.   Years of Survey Questions (see Table 3 for question wordings)

	1984	1985	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1996	1998	2000
Wage controls?	-	3.43	-	3.34	-	-	-	3.30	-	-
Price controls?	-	3.08	-	3.04	-	-	-	3.11	-	-
Less regulation?	-	2.52	-	2.70	-	-	-	2.55	-	-
Jobs programs?	-	2.22	-	2.17	-	-	-	2.13	-	-
Work-week reduction?	-	3.25	-	3.20	-	-	-	3.20	-	-
Support declining industries?	-	2.63	-	2.57	-	-	-	2.68	-	-
Guaranteed employment?	-	2.83	2.55	2.63	2.64	-	-	2.75	2.83	-
Guaranteed empl. & price stability?	2.63	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Keep prices under control?	-	2.03	-	2.05	-	-	-	2.18	-	-
Help industry grow?	-	2.31	-	2.16	-	-	-	2.26	-	-
Provide consumer information?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.22	-	-
Own/regulate electric power?	-	2.57	-	2.29	-	-	-	-	-	-
Own/regulate steel industry?	-	2.59	-	2.29	-	-	-	-	-	-
Own/regulate banking & insurance?	-	2.44	-	2.39	-	-	-	-	-	-
Attitudes abt. "our economic system."	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.47	-	-
Does business have too much/little power?	-	2.45	-	2.51	-	-	-	2.46	-	-
Private enterprise best?	-	-	-	-	-	2.47	2.39	-	-	2.53
Profits vs. worker needs.	-	-	-	-	2.08	-	-	-	-	-
Profits to workers vs. shareholders.	-	-	-	-	2.03	-	-	-	-	-
Do profits benefit everyone?	2.13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Are profits distributed fairly?	2.83	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mgmt. & labor fundamentally at odds?	-	-	2.95	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 3 shows that liberals were more likely than conservatives to hold a variety of anti-free market views. For 16 of the 22 questions, the result is statistically significant (at the 5 percent level). The overall result for political parties is similar: Democrats were more likely than

Republicans to hold anti-market views, and that result is statistically significant for 18 of the 22 questions (Table 4). For most questions, ideology and political party exerted a significant effect in the same direction, e.g., both liberals and Democrats were more likely to believe hold the anti-free market view. This directional conclusion holds true for all of the results discussed below, unless otherwise noted. In brief, liberals and Democrats were more likely than conservatives and Republicans to support wage and price controls, and to believe that the government has a strong role to play in job creation, even to the point of providing full employment. As for government ownership of the means of production - the defining characteristic of socialism - liberals were more prone to support state ownership of key industries, including power production, banking, and steel. Liberals also had a generally negative view of business and profit.

Table 3.   Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative

* = Ideology *not* statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

Source: General Social Survey (see Table 2 for years); see Davis et al. 2005.

"Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Circle one number for each action to show whether you are in favor of it or against it."

(1 = "Strongly in favor of"; 2 = "In favor of"; 3 = "Neither in favor nor against"; 4 = "Against"; 5 = "Strongly against.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
Control wages by legislation.	3.34	2.95	3.21	3.29	3.27	3.51	3.58	3.39
Control prices by legislation.	3.08	2.72	2.97	3.13	2.94	3.25	3.36	3.23
Less regulation of business.	2.59	3.28	2.74	2.70	2.66	2.47	2.33	2.40
Financing projects to create new jobs.	2.16	1.89	1.99	2.12	2.09	2.30	2.36	2.37
Reducing the work week to create more jobs.	3.21	2.61	3.11	3.24	3.18	3.27	3.39	3.52
Support declining industries to protect jobs.*	2.62	2.53	2.59	2.68	2.51	2.73	2.85	2.66

"On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to provide a job for

Table 3. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative

everyone who wants one?"

(1 = "Definitely should be"; 2 = "Probably should be"; 3 = "Probably should not be"; 4 = "Definitely should not be.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
	2.70	2.21	2.48	2.68	2.64	2.97	2.91	2.84

"How much do you agree with the following statement? 'The government must see to it that everyone has a job and that prices are stable, even if the rights of businessmen have to be restricted.'"

| | 2.63 | 2.32 | 2.44 | 2.58 | 2.55 | 2.87 | 2.84 | 2.44 |

"On the whole do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to …?"

(1 = "Definitely should be"; 2 = "Probably should be"; 3 = "Probably should not be"; 4 = "Definitely should not be.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
"… keep prices under control"	2.10	1.87	1.96	2.13	1.98	2.29	2.34	2.14
"… provide industry with the help it needs to grow"	2.23	2.01	2.20	2.22	2.19	2.29	2.39	2.25
"… provide consumer information"*	2.22	2.52	2.12	2.11	2.17	2.33	2.27	2.36

"What do you think the government's role in each of these industries should be?"

(1 = "Own it"; 2 = "Control prices and profits but not own it"; 3 = "Neither own it nor control its prices and profits.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
electric power	2.28	1.88	2.27	2.22	2.28	2.32	2.31	2.31
the steel industry	2.60	2.17	2.58	2.59	2.56	2.69	2.66	2.55
banking and insurance	2.41	2.13	2.40	2.32	2.40	2.48	2.48	2.38

*"On the whole, do you think our economic system is…?"**

(1 = "the best system we could possibly have"; 2 = "basically okay but in need of some tinkering"; 3 = "in need of some fundamental changes"; 4 = "needing to be replaced by some other system.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
	2.47	2.70	2.55	2.48	2.47	2.45	2.33	2.75

"How about business and industry, do they have too much or too little power?"

Table 3.   Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
(1 = "Far too much power"; 2 = "Too much power"; 3 = "About the right amount of power"; 4 = "Too little power"; 5 = "Far too little power.")								
	2.47	1.81	2.29	2.47	2.49	2.47	2.62	2.52

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
(1 = "Strongly agree"; 2 = "Agree"; 3 = "Neither agree nor disagree"; 4 = "Disagree"; 5 = "Strongly disagree.")								
Private enterprise is the best way to solve America's problems.	2.46	2.79	2.70	2.54	2.56	2.35	2.13	2.09
The way most companies work, the only thing management cares about is profits, regardless of what workers want or need.*	2.08	1.97	2.03	2.04	2.06	2.13	2.19	1.95
Corporations should pay more of their profits to workers and less to shareholders.*	2.03	1.83	1.88	1.99	1.98	2.23	2.15	2.20
The economy can run only if business men make good profits. That benefits everyone in the end.*	2.13	2.50	2.29	2.18	2.17	2.03	2.02	1.92
Generally	2.83	3.22	3.04	2.92	2.87	2.71	2.63	2.83

Table 3. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
speaking, business profits are distributed fairly in the United States.								
There will always be conflict between management and workers because they are really on opposite sides.	2.95	2.50	2.94	2.93	2.96	3.14	2.96	2.39

Table 4. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Political Party

	Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republica

* Party ID *not* statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

Source: General Social Survey (see Table 2 for years); see Davis et al. 2005.

"*Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Circle one number for each action to show whether you are in favor of it or against it.*"

(1 = "Strongly in favor of"; 2 = "In favor of"; 3 = "Neither in favor nor against"; 4 = "Against"; 5 = "Strongly against.")

	Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republica
Control of wages by legislation.	3.34	3.09	3.20	3.29	3.29	3.39	3.52	3.72
Control of prices by legislation.	3.08	2.79	2.95	3.00	3.02	3.15	3.22	3.49
Less government regulation of business.	2.59	2.79	2.70	2.77	2.69	2.52	2.46	2.17
Government	2.16	1.89	2.10	2.07	2.05	2.25	2.29	2.56

Table 4.   Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Political Party

	Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republica
financing of projects to create new jobs.								
Reducing the work week to create more jobs.	3.21	2.97	3.11	3.20	3.11	3.26	3.39	3.49
Support declining industries to protect jobs.*	2.62	2.37	2.46	2.67	2.60	2.74	2.76	2.91

"On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one?"

(1 = "Definitely should be"; 2 = "Probably should be"; 3 = "Probably should not be"; 4 = "Definitely should not be.")

	2.70	2.39	2.54	2.62	2.58	2.87	2.92	3.10

"How much do you agree with the following statement? 'The government must see to it that everyone has a job and that prices are stable, even if the rights of businessmen have to be restricted.'"

	2.63	2.31	2.51	2.56	2.52	2.80	2.97	2.97

"On the whole do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to …?"

(1 = "Definitely should be"; 2 = "Probably should be"; 3 = "Probably should not be"; 4 = "Definitely should not be.")

	Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republica
"… keep prices under control"	2.10	1.79	1.94	2.10	1.95	2.18	2.32	2.53
"… provide industry with the help it needs to grow"	2.23	1.99	2.15	2.29	2.19	2.29	2.33	2.45
"… provide consumer information"*	2.22	2.13	2.11	2.14	2.21	2.32	2.24	2.49

"What do you think the government's role in each of these industries should be?"

Table 4.   Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Political Party

	Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republica...
(1 = "Own it"; 2 = "Control prices and profits but not own it"; 3 = "Neither own it nor control its prices and profits.")								
electric power	2.28	2.19	2.27	2.30	2.28	2.27	2.28	2.36
the steel industry	2.60	2.50	2.56	2.65	2.50	2.58	2.68	2.66
banking and insurance	2.41	2.31	2.43	2.43	2.34	2.36	2.45	2.52

*"On the whole, do you think our economic system is…?"**

(1 = "the best system we could possibly have"; 2 = "basically okay but in need of some tinkering"; 3 = "in need c some fundamental changes"; 4 = "needing to be replaced by some other system.")

	2.47	2.57	2.49	2.48	2.69	2.36	2.34	2.28

"How about business and industry, do they have too much or too little power?"

(1 = "Far too much power"; 2 = "Too much power"; 3 = "About the right amount of power"; 4 = "Too little power"; 5 = "Far too little power.")

	2.47	2.35	2.44	2.29	2.53	2.47	2.56	2.65

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

(1 = "Strongly agree"; 2 = "Agree"; 3 = "Neither agree nor disagree"; 4 = "Disagree"; 5 = "Strongly disagree.")

Private enterprise is the best way to solve America's problems.	2.46	2.70	2.64	2.58	2.56	2.35	2.29	1.95
The way most companies work, the only thing management cares about is profits, regardless of what workers want or need.*	2.08	1.95	1.95	1.96	1.99	2.13	2.21	2.36
Corporations	2.03	1.91	1.94	1.94	1.91	2.15	2.16	2.22

Table 4. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Political Party

	Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republican
should pay more of their profits to workers and less to shareholders.*								
The economy can run only if businessmen make good profits. That benefits everyone in the end.*	2.13	2.24	2.25	2.16	2.32	1.94	2.00	1.90
Generally speaking, business profits are distributed fairly in the United States.	2.83	3.02	2.80	3.04	2.89	2.72	2.73	2.39
There will always be conflict between management and workers because they are really on opposite sides.	2.95	2.69	2.91	2.97	2.93	2.94	3.14	3.00

Some of the differences between liberals and conservatives, and between Democrats and Republicans, were rather dramatic. For instance, 30 percent of self-identified liberals favored wage controls, versus 21 percent of conservatives, making liberals about 50 percent more likely to endorse this policy. Similarly, 38 percent of liberals favored price controls, as against 30 percent of conservatives. When asked whether they prefer less government regulation of business, 40 percent of liberals said that they did - but so did nearly half again as many conservatives (57 percent).

As for ownership of the means of production, only 10 percent of liberals agreed that the government should own electric power companies, but fewer than half as many conservatives (4 percent) agreed. Likewise, twice as many liberals (3 percent) as conservatives (1.5 percent) thought that the government should own the steel industry. And 6 percent of the liberals favored government ownership of banks and insurance companies, compared to only 2.4 percent of the conservatives. The differences were larger for those who identify themselves as "extremely liberal" - 26 percent in favor of government ownership of power companies, 7 percent for steel, and 13 percent for banking and insurance - while among "extremely conservative" respondents, the figures were 4 percent, 8 percent, and 6 percent, respectively. Extreme conservatives were actually slightly more in favor of state ownership of the steel industry than extreme liberals; otherwise, the results follow the expected pattern. Overall, then, liberals overwhelmingly rejected state ownership of industry, but those few Americans who supported it were considerably more likely to be liberals than conservatives. (Democrats, however, were not much more likely than Republicans to favor government ownership of industry.)

Liberals (57 percent) were more likely than conservatives (44 percent) to think that business has become too powerful. Many more conservatives than liberals (65 percent vs. 46 percent) agreed that private enterprise "is the best way to solve America's problems." Conservatives (42 percent) were far likelier to believe that business profits are distributed fairly than were liberals (28 percent). Almost half of the self-identified liberals (45 percent), compared with slightly more than a third of the conservatives (36 percent), agreed that the economic system "needs fundamental change." Nearly half (49 percent) of liberals believed that it should be the government's responsibility to "provide a job for everyone who wants one." Only a third of conservatives agreed. One question presented the following statement: "The government must see to it that everyone has a job and that prices are stable, even if the rights of businessmen have to be restricted." Again, 49 percent of liberals agreed, compared to just 35 percent of conservatives.

Counterintuitively, perhaps, 6.5 percent of liberals but 8.4 percent of conservatives went so far as to agree that the economic system needs to be replaced "by some other system"; this difference was not significant at the 5-percent level, but the difference between Democrats and Republicans was, and was not counterintuitive: 53 percent of "strong Democrats" agreed that our economic system needs fundamental change, versus 31 percent of "strong Republicans." The respondents, unfortunately, were not asked what kind of economic system would be better, or how we should change the current one.

On other issues, the differences were smaller. When asked about the role of government in the economy, three out of four of liberals agreed that it should be the government's responsibility to keep prices under control, but so did two in three conservatives (65 percent). Only a slightly greater proportion of liberals (68 percent) than conservatives (63 percent) agreed that it is the government's responsibility to assist industrial growth. Sixty-five percent of liberals, and 58 percent of conservatives, agreed that "it is the responsibility of government to require businesses to provide consumers with the information they need to make informed choices." This difference was not statistically significant (although the difference between Democrats and Republicans was: 63 percent of "strong Democrats" and 53 percent of "strong Republicans" agreed). Similarly,

40 percent of the liberals and 31 percent of the conservatives agreed that steel prices should be subject to price controls, and 54 percent of the liberals, versus 48 percent of the conservatives, thought the government should control banking and insurance prices.

The proposition that business managers care only about profits, "regardless of what workers want or need," won a landslide of liberal assent (73 percent), but only a slightly smaller landslide among conservatives (70 percent). (While three in four "strong Democrats" agreed, only 52 percent of "strong Republicans" did.) An even bigger liberal landslide greeted the proposition that too great a portion of profits goes to shareholders rather than workers; 86 percent of the liberals agreed, but so did 69 percent of the conservatives. In response to the proposition that "the economy can run only if businessmen make good profits. That benefits everyone in the end," 74 percent of the conservatives, and 67 percent of the liberals, assented. Liberals (43 percent) were more likely than conservatives (39 percent) to think that workers and management have conflicting goals, but the difference was not statistically significant. Three out of four liberals (77 percent), but almost two out of three conservatives (63 percent), favored "government financing of projects to create new jobs." Twenty-nine percent of liberals favored a reduction of the work week to create more jobs, versus 23 percent of conservatives, a difference that is not statistically significant. The difference between the proportions of liberals (51 percent) and conservatives (45 percent) who favored government support of declining industries to save jobs was also statistically insignificant. The difference between Democrats and Republicans on this issue is statistically significant, though, with 64 percent of "strong Democrats" and only 40 percent of "strong Republicans" saying they favored government support of declining industries.

What Economic Conservatism?

The results confirm the conventional wisdom that liberals and Democrats are more hostile to free markets than conservatives and Republicans. Almost all of the differences in left/right and Democratic/Republican opinion bear out this view. But focusing too much on the differences should not obscure the similarities. Liberals and Democrats are usually *more* likely than conservatives and Republicans to favor government intervention in the economy, and are *more* suspicious of business. However, the differences between conservatives and liberals are often fairly small, and the data indicate that most conservatives, too, are wary of free markets, bordering on being hostile to them - especially when it comes to particulars, rather than abstractions.

For example, nearly equal proportions of liberals and conservatives agree that the government should control electricity prices (60 vs. 59 percent, respectively). A full 45 percent of conservatives believe that the government should support declining industries, which is only 6 percent lower than the proportion of liberals who hold that view. Seventy percent of conservatives believe that business managers care only about profits "regardless of what workers want or need," which is nearly as large as the proportion of liberals who agree (73 percent). Forty-three percent of liberals believe that workers and management have conflicting goals, but so do 39 percent of conservatives.

The source of these similarities emerges if we stop comparing liberals and conservatives and look at conservatives alone: 65 percent of them believe that it is the government's responsibility to keep prices under control; 63 percent believe that the government should provide jobs; the same proportion favor government aid to growing industries; many agree that the government should control prices in the power, steel, and banking and insurance industries (60, 31, and 48 percent, respectively); and a full 44 percent believe that business is too powerful. Moreover, an overwhelming 69 percent of the conservatives agree that shareholders rather than workers receive too much money; 63 percent favor government jobs programs; 39 percent agree that workers and management are fundamentally at odds; 35 percent believe that the government has a responsibility to ensure stable prices and jobs for all, even at the expense of business regulation; and a third think that government should actually provide those jobs.

The specific topic of the landmark work in what might be called the study of "public ignorance," "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" (Converse [1964] 2006), was ignorance of ideology. One manifestation of ideological ignorance is for people to identify themselves as "liberal" or "conservative" while having attitudes that contradict what might be thought to be the appropriate attitudes in the "liberal" or "conservative" "package" of beliefs. It is hard to tell if the GSS findings confirm this picture.

Consider some of the mean values for ideological positions shown in Table 3. "Extreme liberals" are almost always more hostile toward business and the free market than more moderate liberals. However, "extreme conservatives" are slightly *more* likely than moderate conservatives (labeled in Table 3 as "slightly conservative") to support wage controls, price controls, and a number of other economic positions traditionally associated with the left. Indeed, for both liberals and conservatives, strong-ideologue status typically promotes anti-market attitudes; for most of the questions used in this study (15 of 22), "extreme conservatives" were slightly more prone to antimarket views than "slight conservatives," even though conservatives overall were less hostile to markets than liberals.

In short, while liberals and conservatives differ in unsurprising ways, these findings undermine the stereotype of conservatives as "free marketers." A more accurate interpretation would be that conservatives are free marketers *in comparison to liberals,* but not in any absolute, concrete, or radical sense. Anyone expecting conservatives at large to be "market fundamentalists," or to favor any concrete reduction in government supervision of the economy, will be surprised by these findings.

The Economic Consensus

On the other hand, Americans are far from being socialists, at least according to the classic definition (government ownership of the means of production). The tendency for the few who qualify as socialists to self-categorize as liberals pales into insignificance when their tiny numbers are kept in mind. Similarly, majorities of both liberals and conservatives tend to reject wage and price controls, a classic feature of planned economies. And while two-thirds of the

conservatives support problem solving through "private enterprise," so do nearly half of the liberals.

These three findings might be said to support the view that Americans overwhelmingly favor "capitalism" in the abstract, as does both liberals' (67 percent) and conservatives' (74 percent) support for "good profits" for business. The expected direction of the divergences between liberals and conservatives on these issues should not hide the large area of common, albeit abstract, ground shared by most liberals and conservatives.

By the same token, however, the fact that three-quarters of the liberals think that it is the government's responsibility to keep prices under control shouldn't obscure the fact that two-thirds of the conservatives agree. Almost 9 in 10 liberals essentially think that workers are being exploited by shareholders - but so do nearly 7 in 10 conservatives.

It is a truism that Americans oppose "big government" in principle, but that they support all of the specific components that, together, make government big. This tendency leads Americans to support a kind of "welfare capitalism" at the polls, as described by Herbert McClosky and John Zaller (1984). Liberals and conservatives alike reject socialism and, it seems, a planned economy. But they nearly as overwhelmingly support government regulation of the economy. In short, they endorse, in its rough outlines, the status quo: a heavily regulated capitalist economy. Judging by the GSS, this truism is true.

REFERENCES

1. Converse, Philip E. ([1964] 2006) The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 1-74.

2. Davis, James, Smith, Thomas and Mardsen, Peter (2005) *General Social Survey, 1972-2004: Cumulative Codebook* National Opinion Research Centers , Chicago

3. Klein, Daniel and Stern, Charlotta (2005) "Professors and Their Politics: The Public Policy Views of Social Scientists. *Critical Review* **17**:(3-4) , pp. 257-304.

4. McCloskey, Herbert and Zaller, John (1984) *The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward Capitalism and Democracy* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass.

List of Tables

Table 1.   Control Variables

variable	mean
1. 1 if male, 0 if female.	

Table 1.   Control Variables

variable	mean

2. "What race do you consider yourself?" 1 if black, 0 other.

3. "Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a Republican, Democrat, Independent, or what?" 0 = strong Democrat; 1 = not very strong Democrat; 2 = independent, close to Democrat; 3 = independent; 4 = independent, close to Republican; 5 = not very strong Republican; 6 = strong Republican.

4. "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal - point 1 - to extremely conservative - point 7. Where would you place yourself on this scale?" 1 = extremely liberal, 2 = liberal, 3 = slightly liberal, 4 = moderate, 5 = slightly conservative, 6 = conservative, 7 = extremely conservative.

5. "During the last few years, has your financial situation been getting better, worse, or has it stayed the same?" 1 = getting worse, 2 = stayed the same, 3 = getting better.

6. "Thinking about the next 12 months, how likely do you think it is that you will lose your job or be laid off - very likely, fairly likely, not too likely, or not at all likely?" 1 = very likely; 2 = fairly likely; 3 = not too likely; 4 = not at all likely.

7. Years of schooling completed.

Source: Derived from General Social Survey variable identifiers age, sex, race, partyid, polviews, realing, finalter, joblose, educ, and wordsum. See Davis et al. 2005.

variable	mean
Age	45.21
Sex (male)[1]	.44
Race (percent white)[2]	.83
Political party[3]	2.65
Ideology[4]	4.10
Financial situation[5]	2.18
Job security assessment[6]	3.49
Education[7]	12.54

Table 2.   Years of Survey Questions (see Table 3 for question wordings)

	1984	1985	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1996	1998	2000
Wage controls?	-	3.43	-	3.34	-	-	-	3.30	-	-
Price controls?	-	3.08	-	3.04	-	-	-	3.11	-	-
Less regulation?	-	2.52	-	2.70	-	-	-	2.55	-	-

Table 2. Years of Survey Questions (see Table 3 for question wordings)

	1984	1985	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993	1996	1998	2000
Jobs programs?	-	2.22	-	2.17	-	-	-	2.13	-	-
Work-week reduction?	-	3.25	-	3.20	-	-	-	3.20	-	-
Support declining industries?	-	2.63	-	2.57	-	-	-	2.68	-	-
Guaranteed employment?	-	2.83	2.55	2.63	2.64	-	-	2.75	2.83	-
Guaranteed empl. & price stability?	2.63	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Keep prices under control?	-	2.03	-	2.05	-	-	-	2.18	-	-
Help industry grow?	-	2.31	-	2.16	-	-	-	2.26	-	-
Provide consumer information?	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.22	-	-
Own/regulate electric power?	-	2.57	-	2.29	-	-	-	-	-	-
Own/regulate steel industry?	-	2.59	-	2.29	-	-	-	-	-	-
Own/regulate banking & insurance?	-	2.44	-	2.39	-	-	-	-	-	-
Attitudes abt. "our economic system."	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	2.47	-	-
Does business have too much/little power?	-	2.45	-	2.51	-	-	-	2.46	-	-
Private enterprise best?	-	-	-	-	-	2.47	2.39	-	-	2.53
Profits vs. worker needs.	-	-	-	-	2.08	-	-	-	-	-
Profits to workers vs. shareholders.	-	-	-	-	2.03	-	-	-	-	-
Do profits benefit everyone?	2.13	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Are profits distributed fairly?	2.83	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Mgmt. & labor fundamentally at odds?	-	-	2.95	-	-	-	-	-	-	-

Table 3. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
Control wages by legislation.	3.34	2.95	3.21	3.29	3.27	3.51	3.58	3.39

[*] = Ideology *not* statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

Source: General Social Survey (see Table 2 for years); see Davis et al. 2005.

"*Here are some things the government might do for the economy. Circle one number for each action to show whether you are in favor of it or against it.*"

(1 = "Strongly in favor of"; 2 = "In favor of"; 3 = "Neither in favor nor against"; 4 = "Against"; 5 = "Strongly against.")

Table 3. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
Control prices by legislation.	3.08	2.72	2.97	3.13	2.94	3.25	3.36	3.23
Less regulation of business.	2.59	3.28	2.74	2.70	2.66	2.47	2.33	2.40
Financing projects to create new jobs.	2.16	1.89	1.99	2.12	2.09	2.30	2.36	2.37
Reducing the work week to create more jobs.	3.21	2.61	3.11	3.24	3.18	3.27	3.39	3.52
Support declining industries to protect jobs.*	2.62	2.53	2.59	2.68	2.51	2.73	2.85	2.66

"On the whole, do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one?"

(1 = "Definitely should be"; 2 = "Probably should be"; 3 = "Probably should not be"; 4 = "Definitely should not be.")

	2.70	2.21	2.48	2.68	2.64	2.97	2.91	2.84

"How much do you agree with the following statement? 'The government must see to it that everyone has a job and that prices are stable, even if the rights of businessmen have to be restricted.'"

	2.63	2.32	2.44	2.58	2.55	2.87	2.84	2.44

"On the whole do you think it should or should not be the government's responsibility to …?"

(1 = "Definitely should be"; 2 = "Probably should be"; 3 = "Probably should not be"; 4 = "Definitely should not be.")

"… keep prices under control"	2.10	1.87	1.96	2.13	1.98	2.29	2.34	2.14
"… provide industry with the help it needs to grow"	2.23	2.01	2.20	2.22	2.19	2.29	2.39	2.25
"… provide	2.22	2.52	2.12	2.11	2.17	2.33	2.27	2.36

Table 3. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
consumer information"*								

"What do you think the government's role in each of these industries should be?"

(1 = "Own it"; 2 = "Control prices and profits but not own it"; 3 = "Neither own it nor control its prices and profits.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
electric power	2.28	1.88	2.27	2.22	2.28	2.32	2.31	2.31
the steel industry	2.60	2.17	2.58	2.59	2.56	2.69	2.66	2.55
banking and insurance	2.41	2.13	2.40	2.32	2.40	2.48	2.48	2.38

"On the whole, do you think our economic system is…?"

(1 = "the best system we could possibly have"; 2 = "basically okay but in need of some tinkering"; 3 = "in need of some fundamental changes"; 4 = "needing to be replaced by some other system.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
	2.47	2.70	2.55	2.48	2.47	2.45	2.33	2.75

"How about business and industry, do they have too much or too little power?"

(1 = "Far too much power"; 2 = "Too much power"; 3 = "About the right amount of power"; 4 = "Too little power"; 5 = "Far too little power.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
	2.47	1.81	2.29	2.47	2.49	2.47	2.62	2.52

"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?"

(1 = "Strongly agree"; 2 = "Agree"; 3 = "Neither agree nor disagree"; 4 = "Disagree"; 5 = "Strongly disagree.")

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
Private enterprise is the best way to solve America's problems.	2.46	2.79	2.70	2.54	2.56	2.35	2.13	2.09
The way most companies work, the only thing management cares about is profits, regardless of	2.08	1.97	2.03	2.04	2.06	2.13	2.19	1.95

Table 3. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Ideology

	Overall Mean	Extremely Liberal	Liberal	Slightly Liberal	Moderate	Slightly Conservative	Conservative	Extremely Conservative
what workers want or need.*								
Corporations should pay more of their profits to workers and less to shareholders.*	2.03	1.83	1.88	1.99	1.98	2.23	2.15	2.20
The economy can run only if business men make good profits. That benefits everyone in the end.*	2.13	2.50	2.29	2.18	2.17	2.03	2.02	1.92
Generally speaking, business profits are distributed fairly in the United States.	2.83	3.22	3.04	2.92	2.87	2.71	2.63	2.83
There will always be conflict between management and workers because they are really on opposite sides.	2.95	2.50	2.94	2.93	2.96	3.14	2.96	2.39

Table 4. Economics Questions and Mean Answers by Political Party

Overall Mean	Strong Democrat	Not Very Strong Democrat	Independent, Close to Democrat	Independent	Independent, Close to Republican	Not Very Strong Republican	Strong Republican

* Party ID *not* statistically significant at the 5-percent level.

Source: General Social Survey (see Table 2 for years); see Davis et al. 2005.

Sebastian Benthall

Kudos for the Mindless Expert

Abstract

Arguments for skepticism about political expertise abound. The skeptics believe that political matters are too unpredictable, experts too dogmatic, social science too imprecise, or the electorate too blind to justify hopefulness about the results of real-world democracy. Philip Tetlock's empirical research suggests, however, that there is some regularity to the political world, and that while most political experts have a poor grasp of it, some (Isaiah Berlin's "foxes") do better than others (his "hedgehogs"). And Tetlock's research suggests that our political judgments can be improved if we trust more in mechanical, statistical prediction, which outperforms even "fox-like" experts.

Introduction

In *Expert Political Judgment* (Princeton University Press, 2005), Philip E. Tetlock has the audacity to use the strategies of the psychologist to evaluate the quality of political "experts," and, indeed, to see whether expertise exists.

The ambitiousness of Tetlock's agenda would be hubristic if it were not matched by his Herculean methodology. His empirical work spanned 20 years of unfolding political history. Throughout this period, he quizzed hundreds of political experts about their forecasts on issues of national security, economic and policy performance, and the change of political regimes. For example, some experts were asked (about democracies with presidential elections), "Should we expect that after the next election or next two elections, the current incumbent/party will lose control, will retain control with reduced popular support, or retain control with greater popular support?" (247). Others were asked to predict if growth rates in GDP (or marginal tax rates, or central government expenditures, etc.) would increase, decrease, or remain the same.

Tetlock's subjects were asked to report their predictions by giving everything from numerical subjective probability measures to a record of their free-flowing thoughts. After the relevant events had spun out one way or the other, Tetlock compared the predictions with authoritative sources (e.g., the *CIA Factbook* and the records of the World Bank) to score the experts' judgments against reality (249-50). Finally, he followed up with the experts after the fact, to see how they reacted to being called out on their blunders.

The result is that Tetlock brings what might appear to be a hopelessly subjective question - what is good political judgment? - under rigorous scientific scrutiny by holding the judgments themselves to scientific standards. For once, political experts are held accountable in a

systematic way. Their judgments are measured with respect to their "calibration" to reality - How well did they predict the frequency of political events? - and "discrimination" - How well did they predict when events were going to deviate from the norm?

Tetlock's main conclusion is a surprise. Variables that one might expect to be good indicators of good judgment, such as professional experience or academic training, turn out to correlate negligibly with success. Instead, the most significant indicator is the "cognitive style" of the expert's thinking. Tetlock illustrates this psychological dimension with Isaiah Berlin's (1953) metaphor of foxes and hedgehogs. Hedgehogs know one thing well: they back their understanding of the world into a single unifying theory, confidently deriving conclusions from it deductively. They are frustrated when others make things seem more complicated than they really are. Foxes, on the other hand, know many things. But this internal pluralism leads them to hold many contradictory ideas at once. They lack confidence, being proficient at undercutting their own opinions; they expect that they are missing the real complexity of the situation.

Tetlock (77) ranks the calibration and discrimination scores of human experts varying on the cognitive-style dimension (hedgehogs at one extreme, foxes on the other, and intermediate "hedge-foxes" and "fox-hogs" in between) against various "mindless" competitors, including randomly guessing "dart-throwing chimps" - which made predictions literally at chance rates, assigning equal probability to all outcomes - and several extrapolation algorithms. These algorithms varied in sophistication. At the bottom of the totem pole were algorithms that merely projected from the past rate of occurrence of the event in question (regime change, economic growth, and so on). More advanced algorithms took into account the most recent trends in a specific type of event in a specific place. So, for example, it might extrapolate a nation's GDP five years from now from its GDP in the past ten years. Finally, the most sophisticated mechanical methods were autoregressive lag models, which took into account both the recent trend of the variable itself and the three other most correlated variables in Tetlock's historical data set (283).

The autoregressive lag models dramatically outperformed the competition. Second place went to the better of the extrapolation algorithms, which come in slightly ahead of the foxiest foxes. Human performance drops off as political experts curl up and grow spines. Most hedgehogs come in significantly behind the mindless chimps, such that, as a whole, the "experts" performed approximately at chance.

Those are Tetlock's results in a nutshell, but his conclusions don't exist in an intellectual vacuum. Tetlock, in the most meticulous and accommodating way, picks fights at every step. His first target, and the subject of much of this review, are political skeptics that believe that, for one of a variety of reasons, nobody has political expertise, or that if there were such experts, we wouldn't be able to find them. Tetlock provides evidence to the contrary, showing not only that expertise is out there, but that certain types of people predictably have it.

If we accept that conclusion, a new door opens. What do we do now that we know where to find political expertise? How can we harvest it and put it to use?

Tetlock's recommendation is simple: continue to rank putative experts' expertise, and make those rankings well known. That would help us bring the foxes out of the forest, where they are more likely to be found; perversely, hedgehogs predominantly occupy the spotlight. The market of ideas will reward those who consume careful judgment rather than dogmatic rants and junk social science.

If that happens, however, we should prepare ourselves for a new kind of political expert taking center stage, and not the kind of experts Tetlock is pointing to most emphatically, because the biggest winners in Tetlock's race *weren't* foxes. They were machines. Consistent with other work comparing informal and formal methods of prediction (e.g., Grove and Meehl 1996), statistical prediction performs better than the subjective judgment of experts. If we take our consumption of political expertise seriously, we should recognize that the most expert of experts are mindless.

Expertise Challenged

Arguments that challenge the esteemed role of expertise in politics are not new, but they get such little recognition that they are worth repeating.

Such arguments take several forms. Some maintain that the political environment lacks the kind of structural relations necessary for prediction to be possible. Others concede that a structure exists, but denounce the human nature of so-called experts, claiming that psychological obstacles prevent them from ascertaining the true nature of the structure. A third argument attacks the pretense of social "science": the structure may exist, but the subject-matter makes it impossible to get a scientific grip on it. A fourth argument allows both that there is a truth about politics and that some among us - perhaps some social scientists - may know it, but attribute to the rest of us, as citizens or consumers of political expertise, a meta-level ignorance about which of the so-called experts to turn to.

Tetlock's work is relevant to all these varieties of political skeptic. He directly addresses the first two, whom he dubs ontological and psychological skeptics, respectively. His results, analysis, conclusions, and policy proposal have important implications for the third and fourth. Tetlock gives each type of skeptic a fair shake, but in the end defends a hopeful meliorism against them all.

Ontological skeptics, by Tetlock's definition, "point to fundamental properties of the world that make it impossible to achieve forecasting accuracy beyond crude extrapolation algorithms" (27). These skeptics argue that politics is too complex - too "cloudlike" - to be predictable. Unlike low-level natural phenomena that obey coherent and predictable laws, political phenomena, like meteorological ones, depend on the interactions of thousands of non-linear natural relationships (30-31) and the actions of just as many individual agents, all of whom are trying to second-guess each other (32-33). The result is that politics is an incomprehensibly complex system, in which periods of equilibrium can end in sudden and unpredictable ways.

Psychological skepticism blames the failure of political experts on the capacities of the human mind. By nature, we impose simplistic theories on a complex world. When we generalize from history, we "reason" from the most extreme examples (the Vietnam War, for example) to every particular case (every armed conflict) without reflection (38). We frame conflicts in Manichean terms that belie the moral ambiguity of policies and agents (39). And we have a hard time coping with genuinely random events. Thus, in very simple games of chance, rats perform better than people do (39-40). This implies that even if there is predictability in the political world, political experts, being human, are likely to miss it, at least in its details.

The third kind of skepticism, not explicitly addressed by Tetlock, is a variant of the ontological and psychological skepticism that he is concerned with, as it makes claims about the inability of political experts, and particularly social scientists and those who depend on social science to inform their judgments, to make methodologically sound headway. In particular, this argument appeals to Popperian principles in the philosophy of science, according to which we make scientific progress by making observations which *falsify* our theories. In practice, accomplishing this normally requires the kind of controlled experimentation available to natural scientists but largely impossible for social scientists. So social science *qua* science is hamstrung, undermining political judgment to the extent that it depends on the generalizations with the predictive power that natural science provides (Friedman 2005, ix-xi, xxi-xxv).

The fourth kind of skepticism is concerned not with the existence or availability of political expertise, but with our ability as democratic citizens or consumers of political expertise to find the expert needles in the haystack. Who is qualified to choose which experts are qualified? It would seem that the only people who can judge who truly has expertise are other true experts, but that just pushes the question back to one of how those meta-experts can be distinguished from meta-charlatans.

A Second Chance for Expertise

Whenever possible, Tetlock follows a moderate neopositivist methodology of turning the claims made by the skeptics into testable hypotheses, and then testing them. As a result, Tetlock provides a partial comeback to each skeptical argument raised above.

First, while he does not directly refute ontological skepticism, Tetlock challenges it by demonstrating the relatively high success of sophisticated statistical algorithms in making political predictions. The success of the autoregressive lag models shows that there was real predictability in the situations on which he tested the political experts, predictability that human experts missed (283). It is, at the very least, possible to do better than we are doing now.

The ontological skeptic could strike back by declaring that the dynamics of politics are characterized by "punctuated equilibrium." Predictability may be possible only in the dreary calm between radical tipping points (26, 30-32). Consequently, any predictive success on the part of algorithms must be due to a lack of turbulence in the time that stretches between past trends

and the predicted future. Ultimately, though, social science cannot discover universal laws. The dice will be rolled again when we least expect it.

This argument pushes the boundaries of falsifiability, and thereby flirts with pseudoscience. How could we test whether predictability is merely apparent, other than by proceeding as Tetlock does? If the ontological skeptics do not admit that successful political prediction counts against their position, then their skepticism is, scientifically speaking, on par with astrology.

The ontological skeptic needs to acknowledge that findings of predictability in the political domain require concessions to positivism. Unpredictability is a matter of degree. Political experts may not have anything like a gravitational constant handy, but they may become good at guessing when it will rain - at least in their native climate, and at least until the next ice age comes. Depending on one's point of view, this counts as either a vindication or a humiliation of social science. Tetlock's meliorism appropriately walks a middle line. Sure, the precision of political experts is closer to that of weather forecasters than of electrical engineers. But in meteorology, as in politics, good forecasts can have important positive payoffs. The fact that many long-range predictions turn out to be wrong doesn't diminish the value of knowing when to bring an umbrella to work.

Tetlock devotes the majority of his book to answering the psychological skeptic.

It's true that, on average, alleged experts did dismally on Tetlock's prediction task. But if political forecasts are just glorified guesses, then there should be no such thing as a systematic *good guesser* and, a fortiori, no such thing as a variable that is correlated with systematic good guessing. To the skeptic's credit, it turns out that most of the variables commonly associated with "expertise" - education, professional experience, access to classified information, ideological persuasion, optimism or pessimism, etc. - had no significant correlation with good judgment. But since some experts - the cognitive foxes - came out far ahead of the others, it would seem that the psychological skeptic, like the ontological one, needs to back down.

Showing that good political judgment exists also points toward a reply to the methodological skeptic, who claims that a social science that can generate predictive laws is unlikely. Shifting the focus away from individual experts to social-scientific theory, there is no reason why we could not apply Tetlock's methodology to test the viability of a theory over time, despite the lack of controlled experimentation. Tetlock accomplishes something similar in his use of mindless extrapolation algorithms as benchmarks. In order to make them comparable to his human subjects, he derives from the algorithms the equivalent of a subjective probability assessment of certain future events. Social-scientific theories could be given the same treatment. Note that this methodology does not imply that social-scientific theories need to assign real frequencies to events. Rather, the theories need only have their level of predictive power (it could be none at all) quantified and tested.

As an example, take the theory that if a state adopts neoliberal economic reforms, then it will see economic growth. How should one derive the equivalent of a subjective probability assessment from such a theory? One could start straightforwardly by assigning some high degree of

probability to increases in growth in states that adopt neoliberal reforms. If the purveyors of the theory find this to be too rash a guarantee, nothing prevents them from adjusting downward their stated level of confidence in its predictions. But as rational consumers of social-scientific theory, if not as its producers, we should demand to know how much we should be betting on the theory's correctness. Once we know, the theory can be judged *à la* Tetlock by seeing how well the theory matches reality. And while the task of comparing the changes in growth in states that did and those that did not implement neoliberal reforms is not trivial, it can be done.

Real theories are, of course, much more nuanced than in that example, and just like any other scientific theories they may not be sufficiently refined when they are first proposed. But when the threat of accountability and the light of evidence reveal more conditions of a theory's applicability (perhaps, the local presence of capital and entrepreneurship as additional preconditions of growth), the hypothesis can be revised and the empirical analysis reconsidered. *Voilà!* It is science.

Methodological skeptics will object that many social-scientific theorists humbly refuse to make any predictions whatsoever, insisting that their theories are good only up to the limits of the much-flouted *ceteris paribus* clause. But nothing prevents these theorists from being thrown into the same game played by the more brazen; the "predictions" of the uncertain are coded identically to those of Tetlock's dart-throwing chimps. And the world may prove them right after all. But again, consumers of social-scientific theory should not be blamed for using a Tetlockian method to see if there are any theories that promise tangible rewards.

When we evaluate a theory based on its predictive success in uncontrolled settings, we are relying on Bayesian epistemology. According to the Bayesian rules of rational belief updating, our confidence in a hypothesis should rise when we observe events to which the theory assigns a high degree of likelihood (e.g., an increase in GDP after an opening of markets). Conversely, if we observe an event that a theory determines to be highly unlikely (e.g., a decline in GDP after the opening of markets), the subjective probability that we assign the theory should decline. Bayesianism can be seen as a generalization of Popperian falsificationism, which rejects a theory only when we observe an event that the theory deems *impossible*, except that Bayesianism depends less than falsificationism on controlled experiments, which are largely unavailable in the social sciences.

Who Guards the Guardians?

Tetlock ends the book by taking off his lab coat and getting onto a soapbox, because he recognizes the importance of gathering up good judgment and putting it to use - which means giving consumers of expertise, including the voting public, a way to identify it in the marketplace of ideas. That puts Tetlock head to head against the fourth type of skeptic.

The fourth skeptic asks, "Who guards the guardians?" With Tetlock's help, we have some new answers ready. The first is: "Psychologists guard the guardians." Social scientists may not like

the idea of being evaluated less in *The New York Times* or CNN and more on a psychologist's couch, but there are a couple of good reasons why we, as consumers of political expertise, should consider judging experts primarily on their psychology. The first and obvious reason is that while many of our conventional indicators of expertise have nothing to do with good judgment, cognitive style clearly does. For once, thanks to Tetlock, we have our hands on a good heuristic; it is time to sic the psychologists on the pundits to see who is, in fact, worth listening to.

Savvy consumers of political expertise who change their preferences away from bad heuristics like ideology, group identity, and education and towards foxy thinking will see a marked improvement in the accuracy of their own predictions. But there is no reason to stop with the fox/hedgehog variable. Tetlock's research fortuitously addresses this one aspect of cognitive style and finds a crucial correlation. Further work following Tetlock's methodology could likely discover other measurable psychological correlates of good judgment.

In the midst of his exposition of why foxes out-think hedgehogs, Tetlock often pauses to explain why his results should be seen as a victory for the psychologist. Alongside political skepticism, however, there is a psychological skepticism that counts the lab experiments used by research psychologists as too contrived, such that their results will therefore not generalize to all human behavior. This skepticism is unwarranted. Tetlock's work studies political experts on their own turf, and his results replicate those that research psychologists have known about for years. For example, Scott Hawkins and Reid Hastie's (1990) work on hindsight bias - our disturbing ability to *remember* that we were right all along, even when we are on record predicting just the opposite of what occurred - was given a field test when Tetlock followed up with his subjects after the events they had failed to predict (138). True to other studies of hindsight bias and individual differences (e.g., Campbell and Tesser 1983), hedgehogs showed much more hindsight bias than foxes.

The upshot is that there are ways to discover which psychological traits contribute to expertise; consequently, psychologists can find out who is likely to have true political expertise without being political experts themselves. Psychological evaluation is a far simpler task than political theorizing - Tetlock was able to do it using only a survey - and scientific consensus on the former should be much more robust than on the latter. The result is that shoppers in the marketplace of ideas will have access to reliable buying guides the likes of which have never been seen before, should they seek them out.

But psychological heuristics aren't the whole of Tetlock's story. More fundamentally, he has given us a way to hold experts accountable to intersubjective fact. Interested parties - whether they be academics, entrepreneurs, or hobbyists - can carefully monitor an alleged expert's performance on measures of calibration and discrimination, on how often they "get it right" and how much they "think the right way." The result is that we can say with confidence that to the extent that predictive ability is constitutive of good political judgment, then good judgment can be measured by scientific, statistical tools. This naturally leads to a new answer to our earlier dilemma: "Scientists guard the guardians."

This answer superficially resembles the old technocratic answer in which the public elects scientists *as* guardians, but it is a substantially different proposal. Instead of turning to "experts" for political expertise without knowing whether they are actually quacks, scientists would measure and publicize "experts'" performance in simple contests of predictive power. In short, citizens and other consumers of political expertise could use second-order scientists to provide the best of heuristics for discerning the best first-order scientists.

Tetlock (237) has no delusions of providing a utopian solution, and neither should we: "Human nature being what it is, and the political system creating the perversely self-justifying incentives that it does, I would expect," he writes, that "in short order, faux rating systems will arise that shill for representatives of points of view who feel shortchanged by even the most transparent evaluation systems that bend over backwards to be fair. The signal-to-noise ratio will never be great in a cacophonously pluralistic society such as ours." However, we can, adopting Tetlock's meliorist stance, believe that such a scientific evaluation of political judgment should at the very least make an improvement. New and valuable information regarding the predictive success of experts would be made available for the first time. And despite the possibility of the signal getting lost in the noise, the mere possibility of a potential shift in focus away from nature-of-the-times heuristics, group identification, partisan identification (Converse [1964] 2006), good looks, and irrelevant credentials in favor of demonstrated accuracy in judgment should be encouraging and exciting. There might still be charlatans and fakes, but at least the pretenders will be pretending to be something that is ultimately worthwhile.

Deus Ex Machina

If we are confident in our measure of good political judgment, and if we are as honest as we are earnest in our efforts to find it, then we need to turn our attention to something on which Tetlock spends relatively little time. Specifically, we should be more interested in the experts that were awarded first place in Tetlock's competitions: "mindless" yet sophisticated statistics and other formal methods.

The triumph of statistical algorithms over intuitive expertise should not be surprising. An analogous 1996 metastudy by William Grove and Paul Meehl compared 136 cases of clinical (subjective, impressionistic*) versus* statistical prediction in the psychological domain over a wide range of predictive criteria, including questions of mental-health diagnosis, adjustment to military and prison life, personality description, and, in some cases, aggregate behavior, such as the bankruptcy of firms. Sixty-four of the studies showed the superiority of the statistical method, another 64 favored both the clinical and statistical, and in eight cases the clinicians came out ahead. Given that in the majority of the studies, the clinicians had access to more information than did those employing the statistical method, the metastudy robustly shows the relative success of the statistical methods.

Similarities with Tetlock's research do not end there. In the Grove and Meehl study, experience and professional training made no difference in human experts' predictive success, while with

increasing sophistication, algorithms improved. It is likely that there is a common cause for the success of mechanical prediction in both studies. Grove and Meehl argue that when clinicians are not attempting to create a "mini theory of an individual's psyche," they are at best approximating statistical methods through mental computation. But since brains are unreliable calculators, we do not "assign optimal weights to variables, and …are not consistent in applying [such] weights." In short, computers are better than subconsciously reasoning human brains because computers are better at math.

In the alternative clinicians' approach, rather than nomothetically working from implicit general principles downwards, they attempted to formulate an ideographic theory that narrates the internal workings of the patient, accounting for a cause-and-effect sequence of events and extrapolating from that theory. Some have argued that the proper method of psychology (see Grove and Meehl 1996, 16-18) and social science (Friedman 2005, vi-xi) ought to be ideographic in character. It would follow that statistics, which try to capture nomothetic regularities, would be inappropriate.

Grove and Meehl comment that the nomothetic/ideographic dichotomy is in fact specious, as any ideographic narrative or history is going to draw on general principles. But, more importantly, the nomothetic/ideographic distinction is, for the purposes of analyzing psychological prediction - and, we might add, for the purpose of analyzing political prediction - subordinate to the pragmatic question of which methods provide the best judgments. *That* question is the one that matters when our goal is to predict and control political circumstances to our benefit. And it is, they remind us, an empirical question, not one that can be settled in an armchair.

Tetlock's hedgehogs are the political equivalent of Grove and Meehl's ideographic clinicians. Rather than juggling several theories at once and working in a bottom-up, inductive way that approximates statistical inference, hedgehogs reason in a top-down way, taking cues from the event in question and writing a story that follows the rules of their own theoretical ideology. Because competing hypotheses haven't been developed, let alone considered, hedgehogs have a hard time adapting to disconfirming information by shifting the weight of their confidence around. And so a cycle of irrationality begins, in which hedgehogs embrace any new information that counts as confirmation of their view without question, but defend their belief systems from counterevidence tooth and nail. Every bad judgment is defended by declaring a fluky exogenous shock that violated the *ceteris paribus* clause, or by blaming the fact that politics is "hopelessly cloudlike," or by claiming that the incorrect judgments were *almost* right (129-37). The problem is not that these types of claim are necessarily wrong, but that hedgehogs are so consistently biased in applying them. They cherry-pick the data from which they are inferring confirmation of their theory. That amounts to rotten science, and explains why hedgehogs do so much *worse* than dart-throwing chimps.

Foxes do this to a lesser extent, statistical algorithms do not do it at all, and judgment improves correspondingly. The upshot is that if Tetlock's proposal for monitoring and ranking political experts were implemented, we should expect two kinds of winners. The first would be foxes of the type that Tetlock's research uncovers: those experts who are cognitively endowed with good

judgment. But even the foxiest foxes should be outperformed by "experts" who skillfully employ the mindless computation that Tetlock uses as benchmarks, and against which humanity loses.

Whether we fear or welcome this outcome may depend on our vested interests. Grove and Meehl (1996) speculate about why formal prediction hasn't been more widely adopted in the psychological domain. They suspect that some psychological experts might fear technological unemployment or have a self-concept that depends on their illusory indispensability to society. Others might be so attached to a particular theory that they refuse to accept that an actuarial table could perform better, from a practical perspective. And others might have a general dislike of computers competing and winning against human minds in vital domains of inquiry. All of these reasons extend to the social-science arena as well; the confident hedgehog in the academy or the think tank is at risk of being humiliated and replaced by a computer technician if Tetlock's scientific methodology is implemented in earnest.

But as consumers of expertise, we should be thrilled at the possibility of new products in the marketplace of ideas. Formal prediction is academic plastic: it gets the job done better than the home-grown competition, and can be cheaply mass-produced for the general public. With reliable access to better political judgment, we can obviate some of the concerns of many of the political skeptics. And to the extent that politics is truly unpredictable, the rise of mechanical algorithms that are calibrated to how little we really know would provide welcome relief from the hubris of hedgehogs. Either way, we should look forward to the change, and prepare to one day put our trust in mindless experts.[1]

Notes

1. Hardened skeptics might remain unconvinced by the empirical success of mechanical prediction, due to theoretical qualms about political prediction. The skeptic, with a practiced eye for false objectivity, asks: "Who programs the computers?" More precisely, the problem is that before the extrapolation algorithm is run, there must be theory-laden decisions about how to classify political events, both past and future, and about which events are relevant to the study. How does one choose which events are of the same or different kinds? Can ideological bias be avoided during this prerequisite to statistical inference? Can it be abused for political reasons?

The first way to alleviate these concerns is to look to the studies performed by Tetlock and the analogous studies by Grove and Meehl (1996). Recall that in Tetlock's research, many of the events recorded in his data set and those on which he tested his subjects were on the order of increases or decreases in GDP growth, the change of political parties, rates of unemployment, and rates of defense spending. One could argue that these kinds of categories still depend on theoretical commitments of one sort or another. But as far as the mainstream controversies in politics today, these categories, and the authoritative measurements of them, are taken for granted by both sides. This is because ideological disagreements are often over the *causal interactions* between political events (e.g., between regulating markets and the GDP, or between raising the minimum wage and unemployment), not over what the interesting political events *are*.

The first lesson to be learned, then, is that in the case of ideological differences, categories can be formed that represent the common ground of those involved.

The second response to the skeptic is to remind her that when performed properly, a particular statistical method examines the entire set of data available and will give, as output, a predictive rule that depends not on any particular semantic content of the data, but only on the formal features of the data. In other words, the variables admitted into the predictive model and the weights assigned will depend only on the correlations and frequencies between the variables involved, and they will be calculated in a completely deterministic way. Tetlock's choice of models extended only to inferring from the history of the predicted variable (in the extrapolation algorithms) or from that variable and the three most highly correlated other variables in the data set (in the autoregressive lag models). In principle (and in many of the studies examined by Grove and Meehl), more variables could used.

Any controversy about what categories of events to include in a particular data set can be resolved most easily by *combining the data sets in question*. Providing more information should only help the results of the statistical inference. In this way, mechanical prediction can be pluralistic about its theoretical commitments. If either data set contains events that are better or worse predictors of the predicted phenomenon, this will be reflected in the weights picked by the inference algorithm.

There remains the possibility of a persistent ideologue attempting to select the statistical modeling technique in a way that misrepresents political reality. This would be difficult to accomplish, due to the inflexibility of statistical modeling. But supposing that the rogue statistician discovered a way, his predictions would - were Tetlock's recommendations for the rigorous identification of good political judgment adopted - ultimately suffer in the rankings relative to those who had been more scrupulous in their choice of method.

The answer to the skeptic, then, is a confident report that statistical inference addresses their concerns far better than the "clinical" *status quo* of political prediction. The skeptic's point is still well taken: Tetlock reminds us that "there are ineradicable pockets of subjectivity in political judgment" (238), and that there is still a substantial amount of skill in political *observation*. Original insight into what kinds of events are worth looking at cannot (yet) be provided by a computer. But when the methods of inference are mechanical and the results are closely benchmarked against reality, political observation truly becomes less of an art - in the sense of an expression of the observer's own political ideals - and more of a craft, since the hallmark of a good observed category of political event will be our ability to predict it, its ability to predict other events, and its salience to the consumers of political expertise.

REFERENCES

1. Berlin, Isaiah (1953) *The Hedgehog and the Fox* Weidenfeld and Nicolson , London

2. Campbell, J. and Tesser, A. (1983) Motivational Interpretations of Hindsight Bias: An Individual Difference Analysis.. *Journal of Personality* **51** , pp. 605-620. [crossref]

3. Converse, Philip E. ([1964] 2006) The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 1-74.

4. Friedman, Jeffrey (2005) Popper, Weber, and Hayek: The Epistemology and Politics of Ignorance.. *Critical Review* **17**:(1-3) , pp. i-lviii.

5. Grove, William M. and Meehl, Paul E. (1996) Comparative Efficiency of Informal (Subjective, Impressionistic) and Formal (Mechanical, Algorithmic) Prediction Procedures: The Clinical-Statistical Controversy.. *Psychology, Public Policy, and Law* **2** , pp. 293-323. [crossref]

6. Hawkins, Scott A. and Hastie, Reid (1990) Hindsight: Biased Judgment of Past Events after the Outcomes Are Known.. *Psychological Bulletin* **107** , pp. 311-327. [crossref]

7. Tetlock, Philip E. (2005) *Expert Political Judgment* Princeton University Press , Princeton

Bryan Caplan

Have the Experts Been Weighed and Found Wanting?

Abstract

Tetlock's Expert Political Judgment is a creative, careful, and mostly convincing study of the predictive accuracy of political experts. My only major complaints are that Tetlock (1) understates the predictive accuracy of experts, and (2) does too little to discourage demagogues from misinterpreting his work as a vindication of the wisdom of the average citizen. Experts have much to learn from Tetlock's epistemological audit, but there is still ample evidence that, compared to laymen, experts are very good.

Introduction

Philip E. Tetlock's *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* (Princeton University Press, 2005) is literally awesome. The audacity of his project, and the competence of its execution, inspire awe.

In the mid-1980s, Tetlock made a decision that should thrill defenders of the tenure system. As he puts it, "The project dates back to the year I gained tenure and lost my generic excuse for postponing projects that I knew were worth doing, worthier than anything I was doing back then, but also knew would take a long time to come to fruition" (ix). His plan:

Ask a large, diverse sample of political experts to make well-defined predictions about the future. Among other things, Tetlock asked experts to predict changes in various countries' political leadership and borders; whether or not certain treaties would be approved; GDP growth rates; debt-to-GDP ratios; defense spending amounts; stock-market closing prices; and exchange rates.

Wait for the future to become the past.

See how accurate the experts' predictions were; and figure out what, if anything, predicts *differences* in experts' degree of accuracy.

Twenty years later, Tetlock has a book full of answers. His overarching finding is that experts are poor forecasters: The average political expert barely does better than what Tetlock calls the "chimp" strategy of treating all outcomes as equally probable. (For example, if GDP can go up, stay the same, or go down, a chimp would assign a 1/3 probability to each outcome.)

Unnerving as that finding is, however, Tetlock only devotes one chapter to it. Instead, most of the book focuses on the strongest predictor of *differences* in accuracy: whether the expert is a

single-theory-to-explain-everything kind of guy (a "hedgehog") or a pluralistic eclectic (a "fox"). It turns out that measures of education and experience make little difference; neither does political orientation. But hedgehogs are less accurate than foxes by almost every measure. Tetlock considers a long list of pro-hedgehog objections, but ultimately finds hedgehogs guilty beyond a reasonable doubt.

For purposes of this review, I took Tetlock's fox-hedgehog test. Even though I knew his results in advance, the test pegs me as a moderate hedgehog. Nevertheless, I find Tetlock's evidence for the relative superiority of foxes to be compelling. In fact, I agree with his imaginary "hard-line neopositivist" critic who contends that Tetlock cuts the hedgehogs too much slack.[1] I part ways with Tetlock on some major issues, but I do not claim that he underestimates my own cognitive style.[2] My main quarrels are, rather, that Tetlock underestimates experts in general, and does too little to discourage demagogues from misinterpreting his results.

How does Tetlock underestimate the experts? In a nutshell, his questions are too hard for experts, and too easy for chimps. Tetlock deliberately avoids asking experts what he calls "dumb questions." But it is on these so-called dumb questions that experts' predictions shine, relative to random guessing. Conversely, by partitioning possible responses into reasonable categories (using methods I will shortly explain), Tetlock saved the chimps from severe embarrassment that experts would have avoided in their own.

Furthermore, even if the experts are no better than Tetlock finds, he does too little to discourage demagogues from misinterpreting his results as a vindication of populism. There is only one major instance in which Tetlock compares the accuracy of experts to the accuracy of laymen. The result: The laymen (undergraduate Berkeley psychology majors - quite elite in absolute terms) were far inferior not only to experts, but to chimps.

Thus, the only relevant data in *Expert Political Judgment* further undermine the populist view that the man in the street knows as much as the experts. But the back cover of Tetlock's book still features a confused blurb from *The New Yorker* claiming that "the somewhat gratifying lesson of Philip Tetlock's new book" is "that people who make prediction their business …are no better than the rest of us." Tetlock found no such thing. But in his quest to make experts more accountable, he has accidentally encouraged apologists for popular fallacies. It is important for Tetlock to clear up this misunderstanding before it goes any farther. His goal, after all, is to make experts better, not to delude the man in the street into thinking that experts have nothing to teach him.

Underestimating the Experts

Tetlock distinguishes between "unrelenting relativists," who object to any effort to compare subjective beliefs to objective reality, and "radical skeptics," who simply doubt that experts' subjective beliefs correspond to objective reality.

The relativists refuse to play Tetlock's game. The skeptics, in contrast, play, and play well; they claim that, using standard statistical measures, experts are bad forecasters - and the facts seem to be on their side. Tetlock finds that experts have poor *calibration*: the subjective probabilities they assign are quite different from the objective frequencies that actually occur. Tetlock also reports that experts' *discrimination* - the accuracy of their judgments about what is unusually likely or unlikely to happen - is only moderately better. As he explains:

Radical skeptics should mostly welcome the initial results. Humanity barely bests the chimp, losing on one key variable and winning on the other. We lose on calibration. There are larger average gaps between human probability judgments and reality than there are for those of the hypothetical chimp. But we win on discrimination. We do better at assigning higher probabilities to occurrences than to nonoccurrences than does the chimp. And the win on discrimination is big enough to offset the loss on calibration and give humanity a superior overall probability score. (51-52)

If Tetlock seems to be damning with faint praise, he is. Compared to "case-specific extrapolation algorithms" that naively predict the continuation of past trends, not to mention formal statistical models, the experts lose on both calibration and discrimination:

This latter result demolishes humanity's principal defenses. It neutralizes the argument that forecasters' modest showing on calibration was a price worth paying for the bold, roughly accurate predictions that only humans could deliver. ...And it pours cold water on the comforting notion that human forecasters failed to outperform minimalist benchmarks because they had been assigned an impossible mission - in effect, predicting the unpredictable. (53)

Tetlock's work here is fine, as far as it goes, but there are several important reasons why readers are likely to take away an unduly negative image of expert opinion.

At the outset, it is worth pointing out that Tetlock only asked questions about the future. Why? Because he both suspected and found that experts are *good at* answering questions about the present and the past. As Tetlock explains in a revealing footnote:

Our correspondence measures focused on the future, not the present or past, because we doubted that sophisticated specialists in our sample would make the crude partisan errors of fact ordinary citizens make. ...Pilot testing confirmed these doubts. Even the most dogmatic Democrats in our sample knew that inflation fell in the Reagan years, and even the most dogmatic Republicans knew that budget deficits shrank in the Clinton years. To capture susceptibility to biases among our respondents, we needed a more sophisticated mousetrap. (10)

Once Tetlock puts matters this way, however, it suggests that we should focus more attention on the mousetrap and less on the mouse. How sophisticated did the mousetrap have to be to make the experts' performance so poor? What kinds of questions - and question formats - did Tetlock wind up using?

This is one of the rare cases where Tetlock gets a little defensive. He writes that he is sorely tempted to dismiss the objection that "the researchers asked the *wrong questions* of the *wrong people* at the *wrong time*" with a curt, "'Well, if you think you'd get different results by posing different types of questions to different types of people, go ahead.' That is how science is supposed to proceed" (184).[3] The problem with his seemingly reasonable retort is that Tetlock deliberately *selected* relatively hard questions. One of his criteria was that questions must

pass the "don't bother me too often with dumb questions" test. …No one expected a coup in the United States or United Kingdom, but many regarded coups as serious possibilities in Saudi Arabia, Nigeria, and so on. Experts guffawed at judging the nuclear proliferation risk posed by Canada or Norway, but not the risks posed by Pakistan or North Korea. Some "ridiculous questions" were thus deleted. (244)

On reflection, though, a more neutral word for "ridiculous" is "easy." If you are comparing experts to the chimp's strategy of random guessing, excluding easy questions eliminates the areas where experts would have routed the chimps. Perhaps more compellingly, if you are comparing experts to laymen, positions that experts consider ridiculous often turn out to be popular (Caplan 2007; Somin 2004; Lichter and Rothman 1999; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Thaler 1992; Kraus, Malmfors, and Slovic 1992). To take only one example, when asked to name the two largest components of the federal budget from a list of six areas, the National Survey of Public Knowledge of Welfare Reform and the Federal Budget (Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University 1995) found that *foreign aid* was respondents' most common answer, even though only about 1 percent of the budget is devoted to it. Compared to laymen, then, experts have an uncanny ability to predict foreign aid as a percentage of the budget.

Tetlock also asks quite a few questions that are controversial among the experts themselves.[4] If his goal were solely to distinguish better and worse experts, this would be fine. Since Tetlock also wants to evaluate the predictive ability of the *average* expert, however, there is a simple reason to worry about the inclusion of controversial questions: When experts sharply disagree on a topic, then by definition, the average expert cannot do well.

But Tetlock does more to help the chimp than just avoiding easy questions and asking controversial ones. He also crafts the response options to make chimps look much more knowledgeable than they are. When questions dealt with continuous variables (like GDP growth or stock market closes), respondents did not have to give an exact number. Instead, they were asked whether variables would be *above* a confidence interval, *below* a confidence interval, or *inside* a confidence interval. The catch is that Tetlock picked confidence intervals that make the chimps' strategy fairly effective:

The confidence interval was usually defined by plus or minus 0.5 of a standard deviation of the previous five or ten years of values of the variable. …For example, if GDP growth had been 2.5 percent in the most recently available year, and if the standard deviation of growth values in the last ten years had been 1.5 percent, then the confidence band would have been bounded by 1.75 percent and 3.25 percent. (244)

Assuming a normal distribution, Tetlock approach ensures that variables will go up with a probability of 31 percent, stay the same with a probability of 38 percent, and go down with a probability of 31 percent.[5] As a consequence, the chimp strategy of assigning equal probabilities to all events is almost *automatically* well-calibrated. If, however, Tetlock had made his confidence interval zero - or three - standard deviations wide, random guessing would have been a predictive disaster, and experts would have shined by comparison.

To truly level the playing field between experts and chimps, Tetlock could have asked the experts for exact numbers, and made the chimps guess from a uniform distribution over the whole range of possibilities. For example, he could have asked about defense spending as a percentage of GDP, and made chimps equally likely to guess every number from 0 to 100. Unfair to the chimps? Somewhat, but it is no more unfair than using complex, detailed information to craft three reasonable choices, and then concluding that the chimps' "guesswork" was almost as good as the experts' judgment.

To amplify this lesson, consider the classic question of how long it would take a chimp typing at a keyboard to write *War and Peace*. If the chimp could type anything he wanted, the sun might go out first. But what if each key on the keyboard printed a book rather than a letter, and one of those books was *War and Peace*? It is a lot easier for a chimp to "write" *War and Peace* when someone who actually knows how to do so paves the chimp's way.

At this point, one could reasonably object that my corrections merely increase the advantage of experts over chimps. But they do nothing to narrow the gap between experts and the real winners of Tetlock's horserace: case-specific extrapolations and formal statistical models. Both of these methods continue to work well when questions are easy and/or require exact numbers.

Fair enough, but what are the implications? Suppose that, properly measured, experts crush chimps, but still lose to extrapolations and formal models. Does that make experts' forecasting abilities "good," or "bad"? In my view, the right answer is: pretty good. Almost no one is smart enough to run extrapolations or estimate formal models in his head. For experts to match formal models, they would have to approach Tetlock's questions as a consulting project, not "just a survey."

Speaking at least for my own discipline, most *economists* who are seriously interested in predicting, say, GDP growth rely on formal statistical models. But very few economists would estimate a formal model just to answer a survey. Our time is too valuable, or, to put it less charitably, we're kind of lazy. It is hardly surprising, then, that economists lost to formal models, considering the fact that Tetlock took the time to open his favorite statistical program, and the economists did not. All that this shows is that statistical forecasting is better than from-the-hip forecasting, and that experts are not smart enough to do statistical forecasting without the help of a computer.

Experts cannot escape all of Tetlock's indictment. He makes a convincing case that experts break some basic rules of probability, overestimate their predictive abilities for "non-ridiculous" and controversial questions, and respond poorly to constructive criticism. But contrary to the radical

skeptics, experts can easily beat chimps in a fair game. For the chimps to stand a chance, the rules have to be heavily slanted in their favor.

The Egalitarian Misinterpretation

Tetlock tells us that political experts "barely best the chimp." It is easy to conclude that these so-called "experts" are a bunch of quacks. Question: What would happen if the average voter accepted this conclusion? Would he start relying on the winner of Tetlock's horserace - formal statistical models? No. In all likelihood, if the average voter came to see political experts as quacks, he would rely even more heavily on *his own preconceptions*. As a result, policies would shift in a populist direction. For example, if the public lost whatever respect it now has for experts, one would expect policy to move away from the free-trade prescription of the vast majority of economists, and towards the protectionist policies that most people instinctively favor.

If Tetlock is right, wouldn't a shift toward populism be a good thing - or at least not a bad thing? Many readers will be quick to make this inference, but it is mistaken. Even though Tetlock races experts against a long list of competitors, he says very little about the relative performance of experts versus laymen. As far as I can tell, the only laymen Tetlock tested were a group of:

briefly briefed Berkeley undergraduates. In 1992, we gave psychology majors "facts on file" summaries, each three paragraphs long, that presented basic information on the polities and economies of Russia, India, Canada, South Africa, and Nigeria. We then asked students to make their best guesses on a standard array of outcome variables. (2005, 56)

Out of all the competitors in Tetlock's tournament, these undergraduates came in dead last:

The undergraduates were both less calibrated and less discriminating than professionals working either inside or outside their specialties. …

If one insists on thinking like a human being rather than a statistical algorithm …it is especially dangerous doing so equipped only with the thin knowledge base of the undergraduates. The professionals - experts and dilettantes - possessed an extra measure of sophistication that allowed them to beat the undergraduates soundly. …(56)

The upshot is that Tetlock does nothing to show that experts are "no better than the rest of us." When he does race the two groups, laymen lose decisively. Tetlock, like Voltaire, finds that "common sense is not so common."

The poor performance of the Berkeley undergraduates is particularly noteworthy because these laymen were elite in absolute terms, and received basic information before they made their predictions. We can only imagine how poorly the average American would have done using nothing but the information in his head - and shudder when we realize that "the average

American, using nothing but the information in his head" roughly describes the median American voter.[6]

Actually, we can do more than just imagine how poorly the average American would have done. While no one has administered Tetlock's survey to the general public, an entire literature tests the accuracy of public beliefs about politics, economics, and more (Caplan 2007; Somin 2004; Lichter and Rothman 1999; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Thaler 1992; Kraus, Malmfors, and Slovic 1992). On balance, the public's performance is shockingly bad. Given Tetlock's (2003) own work on "taboo cognitions," this should come as no surprise; to a large extent, people hold political beliefs as sacred dogmas, not scientific hypotheses (Caplan 2007).

My primary target in this section is not Tetlock, but populists who might misread him. Nevertheless, Tetlock could and should have done more to distance himself from populism. He was so intrigued by the differences among different types of experts that he neglected two bigger questions:

What is the main point a broader audience will take away from this book?

How can I help the audience to take away the right point?

As the book is written, it is too easy for a casual reader to think that Tetlock's main point is that political experts are no better than astrologers. If I were Tetlock, I would have tried harder to immunize readers from this misinterpretation. Above all, I would have repeatedly emphasized that "the experts have much to learn, but they also have much to teach," or at least that "however bad experts seem, laymen are far worse."

    *   *   *

Expert Political Judgment is one of the five best books I have ever read in political science. It asks thought-provoking, important questions, and provides creative and compelling answers. Even though he underestimates the experts, Tetlock has become one of the angels on my shoulder, an angel who never tires of asking me "How can you be so sure?" and "How much money would you bet on that prediction?"

Properly interpreted, Tetlock does not show that experts are bad. But he does show many specific ways that experts could be better. Experts ignore his work at their own peril. At the same time, those who misuse Tetlock's work to shield popular errors from expert criticism imperil us all.

Notes

1. Above all, I object to giving experts "value adjustments" because they made "the right mistakes." Bluntly speaking, "I was wrong for the right reasons" amounts to "I wasn't wrong, I

was lying on an anonymous survey for the greater good of humanity." It is hard to take this defense seriously. Among other things, it is open to a courtroom retort: "Were you lying then, or are you lying now?"

2. Tetlock gives hedgehogs many chances to defend themselves, but I doubt that even the most doctrinaire hedgehogs would defend their cognitive style per se. After all, since hedgehogs often radically disagree - and scorn the predictive abilities of rival hedgehogs - they should *expect* the *typical* hedgehog to be a poor forecaster. As noted hedgehog Murray Rothbard once observed: "The clear and logical thinker will always be an 'extremist,' and will therefore always be interesting; his pitfall is to go wildly into error" (quoted in Richman 1988, 355).

3. Tetlock is discussing efforts to make hedgehogs look better, but his point applies just as well to efforts to make experts look better.

4. In fairness to Tetlock, this is standard operating procedure in most public forums. For example, television shows normally invite economists to entertain audiences with debate, not to jointly communicate the expert consensus on a topic.

5. To make the chimps' task even easier, Tetlock could have made the confidence interval equal to the last mean plus or minus .43 SDs - splitting the normal distribution into three equiprobable regions. He also could have adjusted his categories to account for trends. For example, if growth is increasing by .1 SDs per year, he could have made his confidence interval equal to the last mean plus .1 SD, plus or minus .43 SDs.

6. This is a slight exaggeration, because the median voter is moderately more educated than the median adult (Verba et al. 1993).

REFERENCES

1. Caplan, Bryan (2007) *The Myth of the Rational Voter: Why Democracies Choose Bad Policies* Princeton University Press , Princeton

2. Carpini, Michael Delli and Keeter, Scott (1996) *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* Yale University Press , New Haven

3. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University (1995) - no. 1001. http://www.kff.org/kaiserpolls/1001-welftbl.cfmKraus, Nancy, Torbjörn Malmfors, and Paul Slovic. 1992. "Intuitive Toxicology: Expert and Lay Judgments of Chemical Risks." *Risk Analysis* 12(2):215-32

4. Lichter, S. Robert and Rothman, Stanley (1999) *Environmental Cancer: A Political Disease?* Yale University Press , New Haven

5. Richman, Sheldon (Block, Walter and Rockwell, Llewellyn eds.) (1988) Commentator on Our Times: A Quest for the Historical Rothbard.. *Man, Economy, and Liberty: Essays in Honor of Murray N. Rothbard* Ludwig von Mises Institute , Auburn, Ala.

6. Somin, Ilya (2004) Political Ignorance and The Countermajoritarian Difficulty: A New Perspective on the 'Central Obsession' of Constitutional Theory.. *Iowa Law Review* **89**:(4) , pp. 1287-1372.

7. Tetlock, Philip E. (2003) Thinking the Unthinkable: Sacred Values and Taboo Cognitions.. *Trends in Cognitive Science* **7**:(7) , pp. 320-324. [crossref] [pubmed]

8. Tetlock, Philip E. (2005) *Expert Political Judgment: How Good Is It? How Can We Know?* Princeton University Press , Princeton

9. Thaler, Richard (1992) *The Winner's Curse: Paradoxes and Anomalies of Economic Life* Princeton University Press , Princeton

10. Verba, Sidney, Schlozman, Kay, Brady, Henry and Nie, Norman (1993) Citizen Activity: Who Participates? What Do They Say?. *American Political Science Review* **87**:(2) , pp. 303-318. [crossref]

Jon A. Shields

Christian Citizens: The Promise and Limits of Deliberation

Abstract

The media's attentive vigil over America's most militant and outrageous activists in the abortion wars has obscured a massive but quiet effort on the part of evangelicals to engage their opponents in exemplary deliberative discussions about bioethics. For a variety of reasons, activists in the pro-life movement are more committed to carving out civic spaces for such dialogue than are their pro-choice counterparts. This discrepancy invites investigation into the forces that promote and constrain political movements' interest in deliberation, as well as highlighting the undeniable limits to deliberative ideals.

Introduction

Abortion politics is almost universally regarded as an arena in which civic passions have triumphed over reason. This conventional wisdom has prevailed despite surprisingly little evidence about what abortion activists do and say in the public square. Even the most well-regarded works on abortion politics, such as Kristin Luker's *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* (1984), have not relied upon participant observation. Instead, most of our knowledge of abortion activism has been filtered through the media, which have been primarily interested in its most sensational and marginal advocates. Popular and academic impressions of abortion politics, therefore, have been greatly distorted.

Abortion politics have, of course, been marked by public passions, especially in the pro-life camp. Indeed, it was the pro-life movement that launched the largest campaign of civil disobedience since the civil-rights movement. The National Abortion Federation (2006) reports that there were over 600 abortion-clinic blockades and 33,000 arrests between 1977 and 1993. Seven abortion providers even lost their lives at the hands of violent extremists.

But the picture of abortion politics as rife with moral passion is incomplete. As the sensational politics of Operation Rescue-style direct action fades into history, evangelicals have quietly begun enormous efforts to create deliberative conversations about abortion across the country. They are much more invested in creating such civic discussion spaces than are their pro-choice counterparts. Evangelical leaders have been providing their rank and file with a thoroughgoing democratic education, including instruction in bioethics, deliberative ideals, and especially the practice of civility and public reason. Perhaps more remarkably, they ground these ideals in the Gospel itself.

This paper uncovers the thriving world of pro-life deliberative activism by investigating a campus outreach in Denver, Colorado, that was coordinated by Stand to Reason and Justice for All. Stand to Reason is a Christian apologetic organization that every year trains thousands of activists to defend their beliefs by using public reason. It is also routinely hired by Justice for All, a pro-life group devoted to creating deliberative conversations about bioethics.

Justice for All-staffed activists set up large displays on college campuses featuring images of embryos and aborted fetuses at various levels of gestation in an attempt to provoke deliberative discussions and moral sentiments. Justice for All and similar groups, such as the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform, have visited well over 100 campuses and have reached more than a million students. For nearly a week, I immersed myself in the world of these evangelical activists. I sat in on an activist training session; observed conversations; conducted interviews; attended a staff meeting; and shared meals with activists and staffers.[1]

After exploring this case in some detail, I will place it in the larger context of abortion politics by highlighting deeper regularities. I will also explore both the promise and the limits of deliberation in public life. I will conclude by calling for more research so that we can learn more about the realities of American democracy and help political theorists craft and revise their ideas in response to the empirical world, which they all too often confuse with normative constructs.

Christian Deliberators in Training

Many activists in the pro-life movement receive a democratic education that melds secular deliberative ideals with the Gospel. At the forefront of this effort has been Stand to Reason, which trains some 40,000 activists each year and reaches millions more through media appearances.

Stand to Reason challenges activists to be authentically Christian citizens by becoming "ambassadors for Christ." Scriptural inspiration for such Christian diplomacy is found in 2 Corinthians 5:20: "We are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were entering through us." Stand to Reason's "Ambassador's Creed" defines an ambassador as one who practices "grace" and "kindness" and is always "sympathetic and understanding towards the opposition." Ambassadors are also expected to be reasonable, patient, and honest. A Christian citizen, according to the Ambassador's Creed, has "informed convictions (not just feelings), gives reasons, asks questions, [and] aggressively seeks answers." She also "is careful with the facts and will not misrepresent another's view, overstate [her] own case, or understate the demands of the Gospel." To act in a contrary manner "dishonors Christ" (Stand to Reason 2003).

Today's Christian activists, then, are not encouraged to evangelize in any traditional sense. In fact, they are told to avoid scriptural or theological claims in the public square. As Stand to Reason's creed explains: "An Ambassador is careful with language, and will not rely on Christian lingo nor gain unfair advantage with empty rhetoric" (Stand to Reason 2003).

In the days leading up to the Justice for All exhibit in downtown Denver, nearly 100 evangelical student activists were trained to engage other students in persuasive dialogue on abortion. Most of these students had already spent a semester at a Focus on the Family Institute program on Christian apologetics, while others came from local churches and schools. I attended one of the training sessions at Arvada Covenant Church, taught by Steve Wagner of Stand to Reason.

Wagner routinely reminded the assembled students that as Christian ambassadors they should always treat pro-choice students with respect, even when it was not reciprocated. To prepare them to keep their calm in the face of possible antagonism, he organized a series of role-playing games in which he acted the part of an angry pro-choice student. When the training session ended, volunteers were further required to sign Justice for All's volunteer agreement form, which reads in part: "I will always treat people with respect, even if they are verbally angry and/or abusive. I will not shout at people" (Justice for All 2000).

Tactics aside, most of the seminar focused on teaching the students to see their opponents' side, and its flaws, by means of a crash course in pro-life bioethics. In theory, Wagner argued, the pro-choice position *might* be true if it could be demonstrated that the embryo undergoes morally significant developments between conception and birth. Therefore, the other side would have to explain exactly which biological developments transform human organisms into rights-bearers, and how and why developments early in the maturation of human organisms should change their ontology any more than any later developmental change. A newborn is more developed than an embryo or fetus, but so is an adolescent more developed than a newborn, and certain individuals are more developed than others. Pro-choice advocates, he showed, must demonstrate why human worth is shaped by acquired characteristics rather than by inherent worth.

These substantive arguments, Wagner maintained, should be supplemented by a Socratic, open-minded approach: students should ask questions rather than state opinions. "We need to create conversations by asking questions," Wagner said, to help us "clarify their views," "find common ground," and "challenge the[ir] views." He cautioned, "Please don't assume that you know what the other person thinks. It is critical to listen to the other person's story." Finally, he encouraged the practice of humility, since "we all have false beliefs." Or, as a training handout emphasized, "Remember that there are also problems with your thinking (if only you knew what they were, you could correct them!)" (Justice for All n.d.).

Confronting Disagreement

After the training sessions concluded, approximately 100 Justice for All staff and volunteers descended upon the Auraria campus in downtown Denver, which serves the University of Colorado, Metropolitan State College, and the Community College of Denver.[2]

The Justice for All outreach was civil, sometimes remarkably so. Justice for All volunteers warmly greeted the pro-choice counterdemonstrators as they set up their display each morning. When pro-choice students were uncharitable, Justice for All volunteers nonetheless tried to be

Christian Ambassadors. When counterdemonstrators chalked up the nearby sidewalk with such epithets as "Nazi Scum," "Hatred of Women 50 Feet Ahead," and "Taliban," the Justice for All staffers and volunteers quietly prayed for God to "soften their hearts." They did not retaliate when pro-choice activists chanted "pro-life fascists, get your asses off campus" or when a member of the anarchist group Creative Resistance yelled, "Cult members are welcome at my party once the deprogramming is over." Nor were they provoked when Justice for All signs that warned students about the graphic nature of the images were destroyed, or when another student repeatedly told them to "get the fuck off our campus." In one striking instance, several Justice for All volunteers helped pro-choice counterdemonstrators as they struggled to erect their large, cumbersome display, reading "Keep Your Laws of Our Bodies" and "We Won't Go Back."

Some anti-abortion volunteers stressed the strategic utility of engaging other students in civil discourse over and above theological arguments. Reflecting back on the outreach, David reported: "It was very helpful to learn the arguments but more helpful to hear the reiteration to be compassionate. Lives are not saved just because I could out-debate anyone." Another volunteer, Rachel, said: "I was a bit fearful, despite our training, that extremely intellectual people would just rip me apart. I discovered that if you approach people with a kind, caring, non-argumentative demeanor you are far more likely to make progress with that person." Another volunteer observed: "I think that what made the outreach so effective was the willingness of volunteers to talk with students - and the loving way that they did so. It made a world of difference for the students to feel as though they were not being condemned but were being loved and listened to."

Volunteers also emphasized the power of civility to undermine stereotypes about evangelical Christians. A student named Kimberley noted that because the Justice for All volunteers were civil, "perhaps [the other side's] views of pro-lifers, and even Christians changed for the better." Mark explained that many students expect "to hear from a militant, extremist group," but that soon "they realize that they are speaking to someone [who] is loving, has a compassionate heart, and speaks convincingly without shouting. They have come with every defense and wall in place, and often leave with their walls broken down." Stephanie, as well, found that "a lot of stereotypes are broken on both sides when there is dialogue."

However, for most volunteers, their civility was not just efficacious. It also allowed them to be authentically Christian in a secular arena - that is, without appealing directly to their faith. For example, one volunteer claimed that he helped pro-choice activists set up their cumbersome display because it provided him with an opportunity to "show Christ's love." Patricia elaborated this view of Christian citizenship further: "For me the outreach effectively emphasized the underlying purpose and reason we are on this earth: to bring God's glory by engaging our culture in a way that Christ himself modeled for us." Another activist contrasted her soft evangelism with more traditional varieties: "Whether or not I spoke the name of Jesus did not matter. My entire countenance should have spoken louder than anything else." Such civility proved enough to distinguish these evangelicals from their secular neighbors. As another activist put it, the purpose of her volunteerism was "expressing God's love. …Without that we would be no different than other pro-choice or even some pro-life arguers." Audrey, too, reported that "personal attacks …simply lower us to using the same tools that the world uses even though God has offered us so much more."

When these evangelicals are asked how they remained civil in the face of hostility, they invariably claim that God's grace lightened the frustrations and anxieties of public activism. For Elaine, "In many ways it [was] a relief because we do not really have to do anything but be willing and the Lord is faithful to do the rest. …[the] Lord was faithful to help control my tongue, frustration, facial expressions, and body language [so] that the person talking to me would feel safe to share their heart on the subject of abortion." Katherine likewise confessed that she "experienced a weakness that caused me to humbly depend on the power of the Spirit of God." Joy was similarly self effacing: "My only part was in being there, and willing to say what God put in my heart. He took care of the rest, giving me the wisdom to counter lies, the words to say, and the grace to debate with love." And Crystal was emboldened by her sense of God's presence despite persistent self-doubt: "I trusted that if I opened my mouth, God would fill it just with what was needed. He is faithful and can glorify Himself, even through the weakest vessels."

Although the pro-choice counter demonstrators tended not to reciprocate the kindness of Justice for All activists, many clearly found them disarming. A Mennonite named Stephanie reported that one young woman responded with disbelief at the discovery that she was a Christian conservative. According to Stephanie, she replied: "I don't understand - you're so nice." An activist from a pro-choice student group told me that she began to realize that pro-life activists were "regular kids" rather than "monsters with horns." Michael, a heavily tattooed anarchist, even came to respect some of the Justice for All activists, especially those who participated in humanitarian work abroad. And Mishka, a lesbian pro-choice activist, found the Justice for All activists friendly and could muster no enmity toward them.

The evangelicals' civility paved the way for a great deal of dialogue. Thousands of students lingered around the display, and although some simply gazed silently at the images before passing, hundreds of students talked to Justice for All volunteers and staff members. During the first hours of the outreach the volunteers were forbidden from engaging others in conversation, and instead observed the more seasoned Justice for All staff. When the volunteers mustered the confidence to engage others, however, they made up for their lack of expertise by asking questions and focusing on ontological issues. Volunteers routinely referred other students to a panel on the Justice for All display that showed human embryos at different stages of development and asked pro-choice students to explain which developmental changes transformed these organisms into rights-bearing persons. Justice for All volunteers were especially careful to avoid theological arguments, even when baited by pro-choice activists. As one completely surprised anarchist reported to me: "They seem loath to talk about Jesus."

The Justice for All volunteers overwhelming preferred secular arguments, which gave them the intellectual confidence to engage secular students. Barbara emphasized: "I know now how to answer people and give reasons, proof, and concrete answers [for] why abortion is wrong. I can feel confident that I am equipped enough to speak up and not get shot down immediately. I have something to say besides quoting a Bible verse or simply saying that God values life." Likewise, Evelyn was emboldened by philosophy: "I think the reason I felt the desire [to engage people] was not only God prompting me, but I felt well prepared to speak to the people. I believed that my argument had validity and a scientific basis. I had a *reason* for the people to believe what I was saying." Leah similarly reported, "I really loved just talking to people, knowing my

arguments had grounding and could stand criticism. It also helped me to be able to engage, because I wasn't worried about having my argument fail." And Ashley found that "it was great to be equipped with sound and logical explanations and refutations for why abortion is wrong rather than Biblical or emotional reasoning."

Although most students were willing to engage Justice for All staff and volunteers, the pro-choice counterdemonstrators often refused to do likewise. As one piqued professor reported, "We are not here to debate." These activists attributed their lack of interest in debate to the behavior of Justice for All volunteers, whom they regarded as "preachy," "brainwashed," and simply "trying to push religion."

Deliberation Gets a Reality Check

In some respects, the events in Denver were unusual. Other varieties of pro-life activism, for instance, are usually not so well organized or as committed to moral and philosophical dialogue.[3] But the Denver case study nonetheless highlights deeper regularities in the abortion conflict.

First, pro-life activists are generally far more committed to civil discourse than their pro-choice counterparts. The hostile reception given to pro-life activists in Denver is actually quite typical of campus outreaches across the country. Justice for All signs have been destroyed at Baylor and UCLA. And staffers at both Justice for All and the Center for Bio-Ethical Reform report that student and scholar activists are often hostile. An instructor at the University of New Mexico yelled, "You are the American Taliban" (Webb 2002). Some professors at the University of Texas at Austin also lost their tempers. As one of its offending professors confessed, "I am incandescent with rage" (Hutchinson 2001). At the University of Colorado at Boulder, a literature professor took his entire class out to see the Justice for All exhibit and then shouted invective at staffers while his students snickered in the background (Alder 2004).

The largest confrontations in the abortion wars in recent years also underscore these tendencies. At the Walk for Life West Coast, organized around the theme of pro-life feminism in order to appeal to a San Francisco audience, thousands of Bay Area counter demonstrators shouted obscenities, extended their middle fingers, threw condoms, and spat at pro-life marchers. But the pro-life activists, who were reminded beforehand by an organizer to "return any sort of agitation with a smile," did not retaliate.[4] After the first such march in 2005, a stunned *San Francisco Chronicle* reported: "The pro-choice contingent …berated the larger [pro-life] group with insults," while "antiabortionists ignored taunts from pro-choice marchers, smiling politely in response to jeers, flashing peace signs, and singing 'God Bless America'" (Estrella and Lee 2005).

At an even larger confrontation in 2006, pro-choice activists may have been even more aggressive. The pro-choice demonstrators yelled epithets such as "bigots go home" and held signs that read "Fight the Fascist Right," "Fuck Your Agenda," "No to Women Hating Christian Fascist Theocracy," "Religious Terrorists," "Abort More Christians," "Kill Your Kids Motherfucker," and "Catholic Taliban" (Walk for Life West Coast 2006; Associated Press 2006).

Journalists at the *San Francisco Chronicle* once again described the pro-life march as "subdued," while pro-choice counterprotestors were "loud and confrontational" and "jeered and taunted the marchers" (Lee, Buchanan, and Cabanatuan 2006). Yet despite the unusual size and vociferousness of these confrontations, they received only local media attention.

The Denver case underscores a second asymmetry: The general lack of interest in dialogue on the part of the pro-choice movement. On campuses across the country, including the University of Virginia, the University of Texas, the University of Albany, and the University of North Carolina, pro-choice groups have flatly refused to debate pro-life students. In fact, the larger abortion-rights groups with which campus organizations are affiliated actively encourage them to avoid public debate. Planned Parenthood's campus organizer, Jamia Wilson (2004), informed me that she "discourages direct debate." naral Pro-Choice America's "Campus Kit for Pro-Choice Organizers" gives this instruction to its student activists: "Don't waste time talking to anti-choice people" (naral Pro-Choice America 2005). The director of the Pro-Choice Action Network reported: "Along with most other pro-choice groups, we do not engage in debates with the anti-choice" (Arthur 2001).

How can we make sense of pro-choice hostility, even when pro-life activists are so civil and reasonable? And why are pro-life organizations so much more committed to creating civic spaces for civil dialogue?

First, both movements are influenced by different strategic incentives. While the pro-life movement is laboring to change public opinion and policy radically, the pro-choice movement is primarily defending the status quo, as established by *Roe v. Wade*.

The conservatism of the pro-choice movement has not gone unnoticed. Abortion-rights advocate and political scientist Eileen McDonagh (2005, 19) argues that even the pro-choice movement's greatest organizational successes, such as the March for Women's Lives, are essentially "defensive," since they seek to "preserve Roe and to overturn, or ban, the policies pro-life organizations have already enacted." As such, abortion-rights activists are part of a defensive movement that need not be very interested in moral suasion.

Second, the pro-choice movement's caution is encouraged by a profound intellectual problem. On the one hand, pro-choice activists strongly believe that the embryo is not a person and, therefore, is morally insignificant. On the other hand, they struggle when called upon to explain how an embryo is transformed into a person deserving of rights. That is, they have no ready answer to a very basic question: How (and when) does a human organism become inherently valuable? Radically pro-choice philosopher Peter Singer (1993, 149) emphasizes just this point: "Liberals have failed to establish a morally significant dividing line between the newborn baby and the fetus." The pro-choice bioethicist Rosamund Rhodes likewise finds that abortion rights proponents cannot explain "how or why the fetus is transformed into a franchised 'person' by moving from inside the womb to outside or by reaching a certain level of development" (1996, 59). These aren't necessarily decisive objections to the pro-choice position; Singer, for instance, is willing to bite the bullet and advocate infanticide as a logical consequence of his commitment

to devaluing the life of the fetus. But this is not destined to be a very popular conclusion, and the less it is discussed (from the pro-choice perspective), the better.[5]

Third, if the pro-choice movement's conservatism undermines its interest in civil discourse, arguably its liberalism does as well.

Like so many movements that came out of the New Left, the women's movement is deeply committed to participatory egalitarianism and liberty. The result is that its leaders have almost no control over rank-and-file activists, and are reluctant to exercise authority over them (Heclo 1996; Mansbridge 1986; Broder 1980; Shields 2006a). For example, Jane Mansbridge (1986, 128-35) found that in the feminist fight over the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), "the decision not to organize hierarchically was explicit, conscious, and almost unanimous" because "'empowering women' was a goal as important as the ERA." However this commitment to participatory freedom meant that feminist elites had no control over militant and spontaneous acts of civil disobedience. Such aversion to authority is not a problem that so severely confronted previous social movements, including many on the left (such as Alinsky-style community organizing and the labor movement). Thus, the New Left and the movements it influenced represent a radical break in the organization of American social movements; and to the extent that activists, left to their own devices, tend to engage in the contemptuous dismissal of their opponents, there is no source of restraint from above.

Finally, as it had been for the abolitionist and early civil rights movement, pro-lifers see Christian metaphysics as a powerful anchor for the deliberative ideals of civility and public reason. These ideals are consistent with one of Charles Taylor's central arguments in his classic work on modern identity. According to Taylor, Western culture is saddled with high moral standards of universal benevolence and justice that it can't always sustain - a failure that is tempting to blame on "some other people, or group." Taylor (1989, 515-18, 393-401) explains: "My conscience is clear because I oppose them, but what can I do? They stand in the way of universal benevolence; they must be liquidated." The Christian notion of unconditional or Christ-like love (*agape*), however, weakens this temptation because it provides citizens with a belief in the intrinsic goodness and worth of all human beings, regardless of their perceived unworthiness.

Deliberation and Dogma

It is often assumed that deep convictions, especially religious ones, are almost invariably an obstacle to deliberation. Partly for this reason, the political theorist Stephen White (2000, 9, 6-11), for example, is representative of broad trends in contemporary liberal theory in promoting weak ontologies in public life. Those who hold weak rather than strong ontologies are not saddled with "crystalline conviction" of the sort that, he assumes, hinder deliberation. By contrast, White believes, weak ontologists are more skeptical of their own convictions and able to hold them with critical distance, and are thus less susceptible to the dogmatism that plagues strong ontologists, especially those with religious faith. Weak ontologies help citizens cultivate a "receptive ethos" that is "more generous in its attentiveness to others than tolerance and respect

alone" (ibid., 151-53). Similarly, Adam Seligman (2000, 128), a professor of religious studies and Jewish studies, would have religious citizens tie their beliefs to "skeptical toleration," which he defines as an "epistemological modesty whose very uncertainty would prevent intolerance of the other." Skeptically tolerant citizens, according to Seligman, would participate in moral reasoning that is "hesitant in its approach," "modest in its claims," and "continually subjected to rebuttal and counterfactual challenges" (ibid., 129). Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson (1996) have likewise argued that citizens should certainly "not be dogmatic about their view; they should recognize that they may be wrong, and that that their opponents may be right" (77). "Moral fanatics" (44) are clearly hostile to "deliberation," as Gutmann and Thompson define it.

Protestant fundamentalists, such as Jerry Falwell and Randall Terry, do tend to vindicate the concerns of these liberal theorists: fundamentalist theology encourages a militant posture toward non-fundamentalist citizens. Fundamentalists' belligerency, however, emerges from a very different understanding of Scripture than is held by the vast majority of evangelical activists. As George Marsden (1980, 4) has emphasized, it was a "militant opposition to modernism" that "most clearly set off fundamentalism from a number of closely related traditions, such as evangelicalism, revivalism, pietism, the holiness movement, millenarianism, Reformed confessionalism, Baptist traditionalism, and other denominational orthodoxies."[6] Unfortunately, the liberal theorists' knowledge of non-mainline Protestantism seems to be confined to the once-newsworthy fundamentalists, whom their analysis inadvertently lumps together with evangelicals.

The evangelicals at Stand to Reason and Justice for All are not "uncertain" about their beliefs or lacking in "crystalline conviction." So they would count as "moral fanatics" by Gutmann and Thompson's criteria. But the fact is that they support, and adhere to, the highest standards of deliberation. There is no necessary conflict between deliberative ideals and "strong ontology." What matters is not the weakness or strength of one's convictions, but their content: some metaphysics contain powerful resources internal to them that complement democratic ideals, while others do not.

Moreover, as desirable as metaphysical doubt might be in theory, it collides with the democratic ideal of participation. It is strong convictions, not Socratic skepticism and doubt, that have mobilized and sustained American social movements. Indeed, a degree of closed-mindedness may be the price of a more participatory democracy. This view has found recent support from Diana Mutz (2006), who argues that closed social networks contribute to political participation by fomenting political fervor.

Nor is there much evidence that participation in politics will soften moral obduracy, as some believe.[7] According to Gutmann and Thompson, for instance, if citizens deliberate, they will be more cooperative citizens because they will discover that they should not even "try to get what they want." This isn't a conviction that seems to be borne out by reality.[8] For example, many of the evangelical activists I observed became *more* confident in their pro-life convictions after their philosophical and scientific training and their participation in Justice for All's outreach. On the other hand, many evangelicals reported that their greater intellectual and moral confidence made them more willing to engage with others, since they could now give reasons for their position beyond Scripture and theology. The intimidating task of approaching other citizens was

eased, however, precisely because the evangelicals were more certain of the inviolate ontological status of the human embryo. Again, deliberative ideals collide with participatory ones.[9]

The advocates of "epistemological modesty" seem to suggest that in light of new evidence and counterarguments, political worldviews should be abandoned far more readily than they actually are. In the real world of clashing paradigms, overarching beliefs are difficult to jettison, and politics is more contentious than in the deliberative democrats' imaginings. This seems true even in the academy, where the deliberative ideal of detached skepticism is at its most influential. Thinkers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein are so remarkable because it is so rare to see anybody radically overturn his own theories and assumptions. Exceptions like Wittgenstein prove the rule.

Contending factions do indeed sharpen their arguments in light of counterarguments, whether in the academy or in politics. But how often does this lead to genuinely open minds? To the extent that intellectual progress occurs, it may be the product of clashing dogmas rather than of intellectual modesty.

Emotionalism Isn't Dogmatism

It is often assumed that the best arguments come from the most dispassionate minds. If this were true, we would expect to find the strongest pro-life arguments coming from scholars who approach the subject with some emotional distance - and from deliberative democrats themselves. But this is decidedly not the case.

Laurence Tribe's *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes* (1990) and Roger Rosenblatt's *Life Itself* (1992) were billed as books that would elevate and even end the abortion debate, because of their dispassion. Yet, as James Davison Hunter (1994, 23-27) has argued, these works "are really little more than pro-choice apologias for maintaining …a pro-choice resolution to the policy debate."[10] And while Gutmann and Thompson (1996, 74-79) seem to take the pro-life position seriously, they fail to articulate a case against abortion that is half as good as those routinely made by the college-age advocates trained by Stand to Reason and Justice for All (cf. George 1999, 191).

The ironies do not end there. According to Gutmann and Thompson (1996, 52-57), religious arguments should be excluded from political deliberation, because the norm of reciprocity requires citizens to offer grounds for their positions that are "mutually justifiable" and accessible to everyone. This claim has been widely criticized for being insufficiently tolerant of America's pluralism (Galston 1999; Gordon 1997; Rosen 1996). Perhaps so - but most pro-life advocates actually agree with Gutmann and Thompson. The pro-lifers believe that religious arguments should be abandoned in public forums precisely because they tend not to be justifiable and accessible to other citizens.

    *   *   *

As modest as this work has been, it suggests that social scientists need to pay special attention to the contextual forces that shape political movements' disparate interest in deliberative ideals. It seems that such varied factors as whether a movement challenges or defends the status quo, and whether it embraces a participatory ethos that precludes instruction in deliberative dialogue (of the sort that the pro-life activists receive), influence the quality of deliberation in public life.

If we are to get greater leverage on these kinds of questions, we need to make more room for the kind of "soaking and poking" pioneered by the likes of James Q. Wilson and Richard Fenno. Whatever the limitations of this method, it is very difficult to discover what activists do and say in the public square by using such alternative, "rigorous" tools as surveys, experiments, and formal modeling.

The alternative to fuzzier, more "qualitative" approaches is to abandon such questions altogether as beyond the scope of political science (a possibility that was recommended to me by one political scientist during my graduate education). Political scientists have been flirting with this alternative, in practice, for a long time. Indeed, even qualitative political scientists show an overwhelming preference for historical work rather than political anthropology of the sort that Wilson and Fenno did so well. But if we want to get a handle on the empirical realities of politics in practice - and on what it is reasonable to expect from politics as an ideal - then quantitative and archival work needs to be supplemented by observation of actual, disagreeing citizens in action.

Notes

1. I also drew on some 88 "volunteer reflections," which Justice for All routinely administers to all of its student activists shortly after every outreach.

2. I have given pseudonyms to all Justice for All volunteers, in accordance with an agreement with the organization.

3. For a fuller discussion of the varieties of pro-life activism, see Shields 2005.

4. For video footage from a liberal group, see Patterson 2005; from Catholic sources, see Eternal World Television Network 2005.

5. Alternatively, the pro-choice movement could follow the lead of Judith Jarvis Thompson, conceding the pro-life movement's ontological case, yet still claim that killing fetal persons is ethical. However, the pro-choice movement has been reluctant to embrace Thompson's argument: doing so would concede too much moral ground.

6. Critiques of the religious right have tended to treat all theologically orthodox believers as fundamentalists. In this view a fundamentalist is any person who remains devoted to traditional Christian dogmas and embraces some external authority as the ultimate source and arbiter of truth, whether the Catholic Magisterium or an inerrant Bible. The result is that observers have had a difficult time distinguishing between those traditions that are genuinely militant and those that are not. On contemporary fundamentalism and abortion politics, see Risen and Thomas 1998.

7. There is evidence (Mutz 2006) that ordinary citizens (as opposed to activists) will soften their political views in diverse social networks. But the result is that they become more apolitical and withdrawn from public life.

8. A related point is made by Jeffrey Friedman (2006) in his interesting discussion of ideological constraint.

9. I develop this tension further in Shields 2007.

10. Also see McConnell 1991.

REFERENCES

1. - Alder, Jeremy. 2004. Interview by author, Denver, April 14

2. Arthur, Joyce (2001) Why Not to Debate Anti-Choice Spokespersons.. *Human Quest* - http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3861/is_200109/ai_n8954418. Accessed on August 13, 2006

3. Associated Press (2006)

4. Broder, David S. (1980) *Changing of the Guard: Power and Leadership in America* Simon and Schuster , New York

5. Estrella, Cicero A. and Lee, Henry K. (2005) Protesters Face Off Over Abortion Rights.. *San Francisco Chronicle*

6. Eternal World Television Network (2005) - Videotapes 1 and 2

7. Friedman, Jeffrey (2006) Public Competence in Normal and Empirical Theory: Neglected Implications of 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.'. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. i-xliii.

8. Galston, William A. (Macedo ed.) (1999) - 1999

9. George, Robert P. (Macedo ed.) (1999) - 1999

10. Gordon, Robert M. (1997) Democracy and Disagreement.. *Yale Law Journal* **106**:(4) [crossref]

11. Gutmann, Amy and Thompson, Dennis (1996) *Democracy and Disagreement* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass

12. Heclo, Hugh (Balogh, Brian ed.) (1996) The Sixties' False Dawn: Awakenings, Movements, and Postmodern Policy Making.. *Integrating the Sixties* Pennsylvania State University Press , University Park

13. Hunter, James Davison (1994) *Before the Shooting Begins: Searching for Democracy in America's Culture Wars* Free Press , New York

14. Hutchinson, Amanda (2001) Pro-Life Display Draws Pro-Choice Opposition.. *Daily Texan*

15. Justice for All (2000)

16. Justice for All

17. Lee, Henry K., Wyatt, Buchanan and Michael, Cabanatuan (2006) Abortion Showdown: Pro-Choice Marchers Counter Walk for Life's Silent Treatment.. *San Francisco Chronicle*

18. Luker, Krisin (1984) *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood* University of California Press , Berkeley

19. (Macedo, Stephen ed.) (1999) *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement* Oxford University Press , Oxford

20. Mansbridge, Jane J. (1986) *Why We Lost the ERA* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

21. Marsden, George (1980) *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* Oxford University Press , Oxford

22. McConnell, Michael W. (1991) How Not to Promote Serious Debate about Abortion.. *University of Chicago Law Review* p. 58.

23. McDonagh, Eileen (2005) Adding Consent to Choice in the Abortion Debate.. *Society* **42**:(5) , pp. 18-26. [crossref]

24. Mutz, Diana C. (2006) *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

25. naral Pro-Choice America (2005) *Campus Kit for Pro-Choice Organizers* naral Pro-Choice America , Washington, D.C.

26. National Abortion Federation (2006) - http://www.prochoice.org/pubs_research/publications/downloads/about_abortion/violence_statistics.pdf. Accessed on August 13, 2006

27. Patterson, Jeff (2005) - www.indybay.org/news/2005/01/1716850_comment.php

28. Rhodes, Rosamond (Thompson, David C. and Kushner, Thomasine eds.) (1996) Reproduction, Abortion, and Rights.. *Birth to Death: Science and Bioethics* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

29. Risen, James and Thomas, Judy L. (1998) *Wrath of Angels: The American Abortion War* Basic Books , New York

30. Rosen, Jeffrey (1996) In Search of Common Ground.. *The New York Times*

31. Rosenblatt, Roger (1992) *Life Itself: Abortion in the American Mind* Random House , New York

32. Seligman, Adam B. (2000) *Modernity's Wager: Authority, the Self, and Transcendence* Princeton University Press , Princeton

33. Shields, Jon A. (2005) The Nature of Christian Right Activism.. Paper delivered at Fellows Conference, Miller Center of Public Affairs, University of Virginia

34. Shields, Jon A. (2006a) Spiritual Politics on the Left.. *Society* **43**:(6) , pp. 57-62. [crossref]

35. Shields, Jon A. (2006b) Bioethical Politics.. *Society* **43**:(3) , pp. 19-24. [crossref]

36. Shields, Jon A. (2007) Between Passion and Deliberation: The Christian Right and Democratic Ideals.. *Political Science Quarterly* **122**:(1) , pp. 89-113.

37. Singer, Peter (1993) *Practical Ethics,* 2nd ed, Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

38. Stand to Reason (2003)

39. Taylor, Charles (1989) *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass.

40. Tribe, Laurence H. (1990) *Abortion: The Clash of Absolutes* Norton , New York

41. Walk for Life West Coast (2006) - http://www.zombietime.com/walk_for_life/ Accessed August 13, 2006

42. Webb, Andrew (2002) Display Ignites Controversy: Responses to Graphic Exhibit Run Gamut from Horror to Support.. *Daily Lobo*

43. White, Stephen K. (2000) *Sustaining Affirmation: The Strength of Weak Ontology in Political Theory* Princeton University Press , Princeton

44. Wilson, Jamia (2004) - Email to author

David Meskill

Self-Interest Properly *Felt*: Democracy's Unintended Consequences and Tocqueville's Solution

Abstract

The need to cooperate in countless ways in a democracy raises the fundamental question posed by the prisoner's dilemma: How can self-interested individuals cooperate? Tocqueville recognized this problem and anticipated the most convincing solution to date: Robert Frank's conception of emotions as "commitment devices." Tocqueville's analysis of the miscalculations of modern "individualism," which lead people first into isolation and then into servitude, mirrors the failure of conscious rationality in the prisoner's dilemma. Conversely, Tocqueville emphasizes emotional "habits of the heart" as the key to resisting the blandishments of individualism.

Introduction

Democracy, of whatever stripe, requires widespread and ongoing cooperation. People organize themselves into political parties and interest groups of all kinds to pursue common goals. Whether hosting a neighborhood event for a school-board candidate or running a national presidential campaign, active citizens continually pool their efforts.

But how is cooperation among self-interested individuals possible? This question lies, of course, at the root of one of modern game theory's canonical challenges: the "prisoner's dilemma." How can potential partners in an endeavor (such as a political campaign) know that others will not let them do all the work and sponge off of the collective benefits? More generally, under what circumstances are people sometimes able to put their common and long-term interest in working together ahead of their individual and short-term incentive to "defect" - that is, to pursue narrower goals?

The mathematician A. W. Tucker is credited with inventing the term *prisoner's dilemma* in 1950. But Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* ([1835, 1840] 2000) suggested an understanding of the problem - and a solution to it - more than a century earlier. Tocqueville was particularly attuned to the role of subconscious behaviors in allowing people to overcome what today we would call the "commitment problem" that underlies the prisoner's dilemma, and that stands in the way of cooperation. Tocqueville's emphasis on "habits of the heart" anticipated recent arguments that place the emotions within a more broadly conceived theory of rationality. And his analysis of several distinct "arts" of liberty reflected his subtle understanding of the interplay between the emotions and conscious design.

Modern Solutions to the Commitment Problem

In order to appreciate Tocqueville's insights into the layered nature of rationality, we need first to review briefly the commitment problem and the most important attempts to explain how it can be overcome.

In the canonical prisoner's dilemma, two men have been arrested for a crime that they did commit, but which they have pledged to deny having committed (robbery, say) and must choose how to plead. If both of them stick to the claim that they are innocent, the police do not have enough evidence to convict them of the robbery, but they will still be able to send them to jail for a lesser violation (gun possession, for example). Each man must then spend one year in prison. However, the police have structured a plea bargain such that if one suspect confesses to the robbery while the other maintains his innocence, the first man will get off free while the second goes to jail for ten years. Finally, if both confess, each will receive a five-year sentence.

The point of this thought experiment is that for each man to achieve the best possible outcome (spending as little time in jail as possible), he needs something he cannot be sure of: the commitment of the other to hold up his end of their pre-arranged deal. In the absence of that assurance, each man will find it in his best interest to confess, and at the end of the day both will be serving more time (five years) than they would have if they had found a way to cooperate with each other. The determined pursuit of self-interest by each leads to a suboptimal outcome for both.

The basic mechanism of the prisoner's dilemma - the lack of a way of committing oneself to the course of action that would otherwise be best, but that in the absence of commitment is worst - applies to many real-life situations. For example, it undermines the ability to ward off attack by threatening retaliation. Once an attack has occurred, i.e., when the threat of retaliation has already failed, the very reason for the counterstrike (or, more precisely, for threatening it) has disappeared. A potential attacker's foresight of this post-hoc calculation by the defender reduces the credibility of the defender's initial threat. The problem of commitment also applies to a single individual. Somebody at time T1 may decide to try to lose weight in the long term, but when he passes a candy store at T2, his desire for a chocolate bar in the here and now may overwhelm his long-term commitment,[1] producing gratification in the short term but frustration thereafter. Common to such cases is the idea that our conscious pursuit of self-interest under changing circumstances - after we have been caught by the police, after an enemy has ignored our threat, when we come face to face with immediate temptation, and so on - may make it impossible for us to achieve greater self-interested aims in the long term.

But people obviously do cooperate in many instances, so it must be the case either that the initial condition of rational self-interest is absent, or that rationally self-interested people have found methods of overcoming the commitment problem. A number of such methods have been proposed over the last few decades, pre-eminently the related ideas of reciprocal altruism and "tit for tat."[2] According to these accounts, self-interested individuals will "altruistically" help others because they expect the favor to be returned at some time in the future.

Such solutions to the commitment problem presuppose several conditions. There must be repeated interactions between the same actors in order to allow reciprocation. Also, conscious calculation remains central: one must be able to keep track of whom one has helped, and of whether those people have subsequently returned the favor; if they haven't, the original helpers must be willing to punish them, "tit for tat."

Despite the insights that these approaches have undoubtedly provided, they fail to account for important features of cooperative and apparently altruistic behavior. They can't explain why people seem to ignore their self-interest when there is no prospect of a second encounter (for example, why people pay tips in a city they will never visit again). And their reliance on conscious calculation seems to mischaracterize the real, intense motivations of people who are cooperating (or threatening retaliation) in such situations as mass political movements, suicide attacks, and lives spent in the lonely pursuit of hopeless causes.

Robert Frank's [1988] account of *emotions* as evolved commitment devices - and thus as part of a naturally selected *unconscious* rationality - offers the most convincing solution to date of the prisoner's dilemma.[3] Emotions such as love and hate often motivate us to act in ways that conscious rational calculation would tell us are not in our self-interest. Love for a partner can lead us to ignore opportunities to find an even better, more desirable match. Hatred compels people to retaliate for injuries received, even though calculation would tell them that revenge will not remedy the loss and, in fact, is likely to lead to an even costlier cycle of violence. Emotionally induced behavior produces costs such as these in many instances. But the gains in the long run will often be greater. The fact that emotions sometimes lead us to set aside conscious calculation, thereby ignoring opportunities for a windfall, helps us to overcome the commitment problem. Without love, people would be warier about entering relationships in the first place, for fear that their calculating partner would abandon them at the first sign of a more attractive mate. Without hatred, threats to retaliate would be less credible, so attack would be more frequent.

Emotions stake us to behaviors, then, that in particular instances may prove costly, but overall enable us to gain. The emotional dispositions need to be recognizable by others and hard to fake.

Evolved, hard-wired emotions are, in Frank's account, crucial commitment devices, but they are not the only ones. Habits are somewhat weaker, but nonetheless effective subconscious mechanisms for binding oneself to certain behaviors. Many habits develop unintentionally and, ultimately, are unwelcome: few people set out to become alcoholics. Others, however, including adherence to particular norms, can be consciously cultivated: our parents, teachers, and even we ourselves can aim to inculcate certain of our behaviors and to inhibit others. If we are keen on becoming healthier, for example, we may at first consciously choose a route home that cuts a wide swath around a tempting candy store. Once we have made it a firm habit not to eat sweets, we are free again to take the shorter path without risk. The possibility of consciously cultivating subconscious habits (which themselves, in turn, help to override short-term conscious calculation) opens the door to institutional design in the political realm, as we shall see below.

Frank's inclusion of the passions within a broader notion of adaptive rationality significantly advances our understanding of how people do, in fact, overcome the inherent limits of strictly conscious rational calculation. His account thereby downplays the role of conscious rationality, which has loomed so large in Western thought, especially since the Enlightenment and the triumphs of nineteenth-century science. Conversely, he elevates the emotions (and their shadows, the habits), which have more often than not been vilified for their ostensible irrationality.[4]

From Unintended Good Consequences to Unintended Bad Ones

As Frank himself notes, in some ways he is building on the work of several early-modern thinkers who did recognize the positive contribution of the passions. Eighteenth-century British "sentimentalist" philosophers, including Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Smith, rooted altruism in universally shared empathetic emotions, not in reason. According to Hume ([1748] 2002, 302), for example, morality is "more properly felt than judg'd of." And Smith ([1759] 1976, 9) characterized "sympathy," which "interest[s]" man "in the fortune of others, and render[s] their happiness necessary to him," as one of the "original passions of human nature."

Yet Frank points out that the eighteenth-century sentimentalists remain separated from modern conceptions of "passions within reason" by a number of assumptions. Most importantly, they by and large ascribed man's sociable nature to the overarching order of the world, and ultimately to God.[5] That is, people are constituted to care about and help their fellow man because this contributes, not primarily to their own well-being, but to that of "the immense fabric of human society" (Smith [1759] 1976, 86). Smith, it is true, does point out the congruence of decent behavior and individual benefit, especially for the middle classes. Prudence, temperance, honesty, and other virtues are also the best business practices (Smith [1759] 1976, 63).[6] Yet Smith returns regularly to the idea that the ultimate cause and purpose of all of this is the God-willed order of the universe.[7]

One consequence of this assumption of an overarching order, unremarked by Frank, is that unintended consequences - Smith's famous "invisible hand" - almost always work in a single direction: a positive one. Smith's brilliant and path-breaking account explains how the self-interest of the butcher, brewer, and baker leads to everybody getting their dinner. But it does not investigate the reverse: how good, or at least neutral, intentions can unintentionally lead to bad outcomes. Smith's assumption of a basically benevolent overall order prevented him from inquiring into the mechanisms that undermine cooperation and other beneficial collective actions.

Ironically, it was a more overtly religious thinker than Smith, Tocqueville ([1835, 1840] 2000), writing half a century later, who took this step. For obvious reasons, Tocqueville offered no evolutionary account of human motivation and interaction, and in this he fell short of Frank's explanation. However, the French aristocrat did recognize what Smith had not - the possibility of unintended bad outcomes - and his account of how these could be avoided, which centered on subconscious motivations, brilliantly anticipates the recent work that has broadened our notion of rationality.

Haunted by the tumult of the French Revolution, Tocqueville started from two basic assumptions about the future course of the world (at least the Christian world). Democracy - by which Tocqueville meant the increasing equality of social conditions and, therefore, the perceived *moral* equality of all individuals - was "an irresistible revolution advancing century by century over every obstacle and even now going forward among the ruins it has itself created" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 12). But the democratic torrent could and should be directed and channeled, since equality of social and moral condition could just as easily (indeed, more easily) lead to dreadful outcomes as to ennobling ones.

Tocqueville's reason for writing *Democracy in America* was to help "educate [French] democracy" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 12), steering it away from the shoals narrowly avoided in America. What Tocqueville feared with a "religious dread" (ibid.) was that socially leveled, equal but atomized individuals would be helpless in the face of two dangers: the "tyranny of the majority"; and soft despotism, in which the government "does not break men's will, but softens, bends, and guides it" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 692). If these fates were to be avoided, Tocqueville believed, it was above all the new "individualism" born of the sense of equality that needed to be "educated," so that it became "self interest properly understood."

"Big Government" as Democracy's Unintended Consequence

Tocqueville's is a fairly constructivist psychology. He doubts the independence of the individual mind. He "marvel[s] at the feebleness of human reason" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 286). Circumstances, which Tocqueville summarizes as the "social state," largely determine individual thought and action. In an aristocratic social state, the fixed stations of life, clear and permanent boundaries between groups, and generational links connect men "with something outside themselves, and they are often inclined to forget about themselves" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 507). In like fashion, but with different results, the equality of conditions in America "creates opinions, gives birth to feelings, suggests customs, and modifies whatever it does not create" (ibid., 9). Thus, the democratic social state continues to shape thought, but in ways that clearly concern Tocqueville - and anticipate the mechanisms of game-theoretic "defections."

With the passing of the seemingly immutable older order there also wither salutary unconscious checks on the individual. "Do you not notice how on all sides beliefs are giving way to arguments, and feelings to calculations" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 239)? The apparent openness of the new scene encourages, in particular, short-term calculations of pleasure. "One of the characteristics of democratic times is that all men have a taste for easy successes and immediate pleasures" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 440).

Overarching these changes is a new "individualism," a term of opprobrium for Tocqueville:

As social equality spreads there are more and more people who, though neither rich nor powerful enough to have much hold over others, have gained or kept enough wealth and enough understanding to look after their own needs. Such folk owe no man anything and hardly expect

anything from anybody. They form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their whole destiny is in their own hands. (Ibid., 508.)

Individualism tempts each person to "isolate himself from the mass of his fellows and withdraw into the circle of family and friends" (ibid., 506). In the end, "each man is forever thrown back on himself alone, and there is danger that he may be shut up in the solitude of his own heart" (ibid., 508).

Such solipsism, to Tocqueville ([1840] 2000, 508), is a kind of intoxication, confusing people who are "drunk with their new power." The self-chosen isolation of these individualists is the greatest aid to despotism. It prevents them from joining together to manage their own affairs. More importantly, they overestimate their real strength and fail to realize that they will, in the end, invariably need the help of others. But by then, with his fellow men "both impotent and cold," the individualist

naturally turns his eyes toward that huge entity which alone stands out above the universal level of abasement. His needs, and even more his longings, continually put him in mind of that entity, and he ends by regarding it as the sole and necessary support of his individual weakness. (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 672.)

The huge entity, of course, is the distant, central state, its soft despotism imprinting weakened minds, and ultimately degrading man's dignity by stripping him "of several of the chief attributes of humanity" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 695).

Overcoming the Unintended Consequences of Individualism

The path Tocqueville traces from the democratic social state toward despotism resembles the movement of rational actors toward suboptimal outcomes. Conscious calculation (or miscalculation) by each undermines the prerequisites of cooperation and leads to ruination for all.

To be sure, the precise mechanisms are not identical. For Tocqueville, an initial overestimation of one's independence leads to the eventual breakdown of trust and ties - and the loss of independence. The game-theorist's diagnosis of missing trust is more primordial. Yet the overall accounts of individual choice and social outcome are remarkably similar. Are the solutions, as well?

Tocqueville came to study democracy in America because it was here that the new social state was farthest advanced, but above all because Americans had (so far, at least) successfully mastered its dangers, combining liberty with equality.

Tocqueville identified three sources of the American triumph: circumstances, laws, and mores.

The American circumstances that are conducive to liberty include the plentiful opportunities for moderate wealth, which give men a concrete interest in liberty; the open frontier, which provides a safety valve against conflict; and the lack of foreign enemies, which reduces the need for a strong state. More important still are American laws, by which Tocqueville means not just statutes, but the workings of the political system. Decentralized, subsidiary authority (each township was "a little independent nation" [Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 67]) permits Americans to take an active role in governing themselves. Trials by jury achieve something similar. And lawyers form a salutary ersatz aristocracy, sustaining order and precedent (ibid., 263-70).

More crucial to liberty than circumstances or laws, though, are American mores. Tocqueville ([1835] 2000, 287) refers here "not only to 'moeurs' in the strict sense, which might be called the habits of the heart, but also to the different notions possessed by men, the various opinions current among them, and the sum of ideas that shape mental habits." His own expansive definition notwithstanding, however, Tocqueville's emphasis is precisely on "habits of the heart," "feelings," "spirit" - all less than fully conscious inclinations.

Several explicit, indeed poignant, contrasts between conscious conviction and subconscious habit clearly bring out the priority of the latter. "I am convinced," Tocqueville writes, "that if despotism ever came to be established in the United States it would find it even more difficult to overcome the habits that have sprung from freedom than to conquer the love of freedom itself" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 243). He draws a similar contrast in regard to the profound role of religion in American life. The "political opinions" inspired by the various American denominations certainly contribute to sustaining American freedoms (ibid., 287-90). Yet, compared with this "direct action of religion on politics in the United States, [i]ts indirect action seems to me much greater still" (ibid., 290). Religion "direct[s] mores, and by regulating domestic life it helps regulate the state." Especially under the guidance of women, religion in the circle of the family fosters emollient behavioral norms.

When the American returns from the turmoil of politics to the bosom of the family, he immediately finds a perfect picture of order and peace. There all his pleasures are simple and natural and his joys innocent and quiet, and as the regularity of life brings him happiness, he easily forms the habit of regulating his opinions as well as his tastes. (Ibid., 291)

By inculcating such habits, "it is just when it is not speaking of freedom at all that [religion] best teaches the Americans the art of being free" (ibid., 290).

Tocqueville's antidote to corrosive "individualism," namely "self interest properly understood," likewise relies on a balance of the conscious and the habitual, the rational and the emotional. The weights have shifted, however. In the future, Tocqueville avers, men must learn to connect their personal interest to that of their fellow citizens. More than in the previous cases, Tocqueville here allows for calculation and conscious conviction. Self-interest must, after all, be properly *understood*. Hence the "doctrine" of "enlightened" self-interest, about which Americans love to discourse (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 526-27). Tocqueville traces the shift to democratic circumstances themselves, which are making feelings give way to calculations (ibid., 239). A

"more rational" patriotism is required (ibid., 235), one that connects the idea of rights to personal interest - "the only stable point in the human heart" (ibid., 239).

Unconscious Rationality

Given this emphasis on calculated interest, Tocqueville may seem to have abandoned his previous focus on habits and feelings. A closer look at the actual workings of self-interest properly understood, however, significantly mitigates this impression. Calculation certainly looms larger, as spark and impulse, than before; but in the end, it, too, becomes absorbed by, "intimately linked" and "mingled" with, subconscious behaviors and broader interests (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 235). Political life in the township, the "primary schools" of liberty (ibid., 63), and cooperation in associations are the main sites of this alchemy. In these local settings, where a single individual can make an appreciable difference, each man sees - experiences - his own power and its intimate connection to the well-being of his fellow citizens. Not only his calculations, but his "affections" are roused (ibid., 68); increasingly, the two become fused.

"To gain the affection and respect of your immediate neighbors, a long succession of little services rendered and of obscure good deeds, a constant habit of kindness and an established reputation for disinterestedness, are required" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 511). The initially ambitious man, in being drawn to care for his neighbors, "often finds his self-interest in forgetting about himself" (ibid., 510). In the township, "so close to home and, in a sense, within the family circle" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 69), there are "an infinite number of occasions for the citizens to act together ...so that every day they should feel that they depended on one another" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 511). By combining for various purposes, citizens learn the "art of association" (ibid., 517). Self-interest properly understood, Tocqueville writes, "does not lead the will directly to virtue, [but] it establishes habits which unconsciously turn it that way" (ibid., 527). Given this emphasis on emotion and habit, the more fitting phrase for Tocqueville's antidote to the dangers of calculating individualism might, in fact, be self-interest properly *felt*.

These virtuous habits sink deep roots thanks to practice and time. Anticipating Michael Polanyi's (1958) claims about tacit knowledge, Tocqueville ([1840] 2000, 515) seems to believe that doing is more vital than thinking. "Feelings and ideas are renewed, the heart enlarged, and the understanding developed only by the reciprocal action of men one upon the other." For Americans, patriotism is "a sort of religion strengthened by practical service" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 69). Tocqueville's arresting references to the "art of being free" and to "freedom's apprenticeship" testify further to the importance in his eyes of the wisdom born of practice (ibid., 240).

Experience across time plays a similar role. Setting the impulsive uses made by the French of their newfound liberty against the gentle ways of the Americans, Tocqueville attributes the key difference to the much longer experience of the Americans. In the case of France, "the first idea which comes into a party's mind ...when it gains some strength is that of violence; the thought of

persuasion only comes later, for it is born of experience" (Tocqueville [1835] 2000, 194). Indeed, Tocqueville claims much more broadly that "true enlightenment is in the main born of experience" (ibid., 194). Practice, especially over a long time, fosters important subconscious inclinations.

The most beneficial of these habits impose restraint on our impulses, extending our concerns beyond the present and beyond ourselves. The mores inculcated by religion, Tocqueville ([1835] 2000, 292) emphasizes, bring with them "habits of restraint," which "singularly favor the tranquility of the people as well as the durability of the institutions they have adopted." Even a false religion "imposes …on each man some obligations toward mankind …and so draws him away, from time to time, from thinking about himself" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 444-45).

As religious belief slowly loses its hold over men, Tocqueville hopes that its ersatz - patriotism - can serve the same benignly amnesiac role. This "sort of religion strengthened by practical service" will often lead the citizen of the township to find "his self-interest in forgetting about himself." A persistent theme of *Democracy in America* is its juxtaposition of the alluring, but ultimately baneful, short-term blandishments of equality, on the one hand, and the slow-working and harder-to-discern, but, in the end, richer rewards of liberty, on the other (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 505). To override the impulse to heed the sirens of conscious calculation (or miscalculation), Tocqueville counts on the inertia of mores. These intergenerational and interpersonal ligatures impose a "salutary bondage" (ibid., 434)[8] on weak individuals.

Two Arts of Liberty

If Tocqueville's diagnosis of the dangers of "individualism" resembles the modern game theorist's account of suboptimal outcomes, his solution is remarkably similar to the most compelling recent assessment as well. Like Robert Frank, Tocqueville expands our conception of rationality to include subconscious passions and habits. Modern reassessments of the role of the passions within reason, finally, allow room for some conscious steering of more deeply rooted behaviors (as with choosing to cut a wide swath around the candy store). Such interventions may become especially valuable when, alongside potentially beneficent passions, there appear other, solely destructive emotions.

The very advantages of mores and habits - their invisibility and their inertia - are by their nature, of course, a serious hindrance for the would-be manipulator of democracy. Yet in trying to educate the emerging democracy in France, Tocqueville ([1840] 2000, 667) tries to "point out" steps that lead to servitude so that they may be avoided. He even demands "[a] new political science …for a world itself quite new" (ibid., 12).

Repeatedly, Tocqueville explores the possible consequences of consciously manipulating the often unconscious regularities in people's behavior. His discussion of a "more rational" patriotism to replace fading religion is one example. When he examines the most enduring

source of America's freedom, local political liberty and engagement, Tocqueville ([1840] 2000, 512-13) offers a detailed picture of the conscious cultivation of subconscious mores:

At first it is of necessity that men attend to the public interest, afterward by choice. What had been calculation becomes instinct. By dint of working for the good of his fellow citizens, he in the end acquires the habit and taste of serving them.

The beneficial "mingling" of enlightened political choice with sociable emotions and habits may play an especially important role in light of a salient feature of the democratic social condition: the growing strength of certain destructive passions.

While the potential downward spiral into servitude that Tocqueville hopes to prevent *begins* with the conscious miscalculations of "individualism," it is soon exacerbated by invidious emotions. Envy, in particular - "the ever-fiercer fire of endless hatred felt by democracies against the slightest privileges" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 673) - leads men to demand a strong central state for the sake of depriving their fellows of any remaining advantage. Indeed, this emotional attachment to equality may become so powerful that its beneficiary, a powerful centralized government, "will be the natural thing" in the future (ibid., 674). By contrast, maintaining "individual independence and local liberties will always be the products" not of nature, but "of art" (Tocqueville [1840] 2000, 674) - that is, of deliberate manipulation.

Tocqueville's various uses of the term "art" capture his great, early insights into the intertwining of passions with reason. The "art of being free" - which embodies all those subconscious emotions, habits, and mores necessary for self-restraint and cooperation - is the only antidote to short-sighted, calculating "individualism" and its road to servitude. But another, more conscious "art," indeed something closer to a "new political science," may also be required by those who want to maintain liberty in a democratic age, which is also an age of "natural" envy. This second art will help to cultivate better passions and to avoid worse ones.

Writing after the violent surge of the French Revolution had weakened old certainties, but before anyone had embraced the model of a calculating *Homo economicus*, Tocqueville understood the perils of conscious reason alone, the salutary restraint of habit, and the ennobling possibilities when they are artfully combined.

Notes

1. Richard Herrnstein (2000) pioneered the academic study of people's tendency radically to discount pleasure in the distant future, and to give significantly greater weight to immediate satisfactions.

2. See Trivers 1971 and Axelrod 1984.

3. Other recent thinkers who have also made contributions to this re-evaluation of the emotions in problem solving include Tibor Scitovsky ([1976](#)), Amartya Sen ([1977](#)), Jon Elster ([1979](#)), Daniel Goleman ([1997](#)), Antonio Damasio ([1994](#)), and Martha Nussbaum ([2003](#)). For the purposes of this essay, Frank's convincing statement will be my reference point for this entire body of literature.

4. See Hirschman [1977](#) for a review of the understandable early modern fear of emotional - usually religious - exuberance.

5. This does not apply to the atheist Hume, for whom man's sociable nature had to remain ultimately inexplicable.

6. "In the middling and inferior stations of life, the road to virtue and that to fortune, at least, as men in such stations can reasonably expect to acquire, are, happily in most cases, very nearly the same."

7. See Smith ([1759](#)) 1976, 87, for very illuminating comments on final and efficient causes.

8. The context of this remark is not mores per se, but trust and faith.

REFERENCES

1. Axelrod, Robert (1984) *The Evolution of Cooperation* Basic Books , New York

2. Damasio, Antonio (1994) *Descartes' Error* Putnam , New York

3. Elster, Jon (1979) *Ulysses and the Sirens* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

4. Frank, Robert (1988) *Passions within Reason* W. W. Norton , New York

5. Goleman, Daniel (1997) *Emotional Intelligence* Bantam , New York

6. Herrnstein, Richard (2000) *The Matching Law* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass.

7. Hirschman, Albert O. (1977) *The Passions and the Interests* Princeton University Press , Princeton

8. Hume, David ([1748]. 2002) *A Treatise of Human Nature* Oxford University Press , Oxford

9. Nussbaum, Martha (2003) *Upheavals of Thought* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

10. Polanyi, Michael (1958) *Personal Knowledge* Routledge & Kegan Paul , London

11. Scitovsky, Tibor (1976) *The Joyless Economy* Oxford University Press , Oxford

12. Sen, Amartya (1977) Rational Fools.. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* **6** , pp. 317-344.

13. Smith, Adam ([1759] 1976) *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* Liberty Press , Indianapolis

14. de Tocqueville, Alexis ([1835, 1840]. 2000) *Democracy in America* HarperCollins , New York

15. Trivers, Robert (1971) The Evolution of Reciprocal Altruism.. *Quarterly Review of Biology* **46** , pp. 35-47. [crossref]

Chris Wisniewski

Political Culture vs. Cultural Studies: Reply to Fenster

Abstract

A review of two of the strands of cultural studies that Mark Fenster contends are superior to Murray Edelman's analysis of mass public opinion - Gramsci's theory of hegemony, and Bourdieu's sociology - and a more general look at work in the field of cultural studies suggests that all of these alternatives suffer from severe theoretical and methodological limitations. Future studies of culture and politics need to pose questions similar to the ones that preoccupied Edelman, but they must move beyond the political and interpretive biases that have dominated cultural studies (some of which Edelman shared), as well as the questionable view of "ideology" as a matter of elite domination of the masses, rather than as a mediating, constitutive force in the process of individual opinion formation.

Introduction

In his analysis of Murray Edelman's work on political symbols, Mark Fenster (2005) identifies something of a missed opportunity. He singles out Edelman's work as having the potential to serve a "grand unifying cause" (ibid., 368) for scholars interested in culture, politics, and voter ignorance, but ultimately he decries Edelman's conceptual and methodological shortcomings, which are supposedly so severe as to render his work a dead end.

Fenster's compelling critique of Edelman exposes many deficiencies in Edelman's thought. Less clear, though, is whether, as Fenster suggests, Edelman could have done better if he had appropriated conceptual frameworks from Antonio Gramsci, Pierre Bourdieu, and others in the field of cultural studies. Cultural-studies approaches encounter a series of conceptual problems that limit their effectiveness in analyzing the realities of contemporary democratic politics, arguably more so than did the political limitations of Edelman's work.

Symbolic Politics: Complexity or Quiescence?

The cultural focus of Edelman's approach to politics is overt and indispensable. Edelman clearly saw culture as having a profound political effect, and indeed he saw politics as insurmountably symbolic. When Fenster refers to "the culture of politics" as a central concern for Edelman, the turn of phrase can be taken quite literally. In *The Symbolic Uses of Politic*s, Edelman (1964, 74-152) described politics as though he were analyzing a cultural text or a theatrical performance, devoting much of his account to the actors (political leaders), settings, and language that

legitimate political actions and help to give them their meaning(s). He even compared governmental action to the staging of a play, opera, or ballet, and conjectured that aesthetic theory could serve a vital purpose in further studies of the symbolic nature of political behavior (ibid., 96).[1]

Edelman's emphasis on the cultural nature of politics and the political nature of culture would indeed, as Fenster argues, seem to require an interdisciplinary approach that would bring the interpretive tools of the study of culture to the work of the political scientist. It also would require a theoretical position on where or how political ideologies or positions are embedded in, transmitted through, and received from symbolic systems of meaning - one that Edelman never spelled out. But while I do not question the importance of studying culture and cultural systems of meaning within the field of political science, I do question whether the intellectual tradition of academic "cultural studies" provides the best route to undertaking such cultural studies.

Fenster (2006, 369) distills Edelman's central thesis to the argument that "politics is symbolic and spectacular, and as such misinforms the public and renders it passive." This summary, while accurate as far as it goes, does not adequately capture the generative role that public ignorance and disengagement play, according to Edelman, in the production of symbolic forms.

To Edelman, *ignorance* and *passivity* are as much inputs as they are outcomes of the political process. This is because economic systems and social life are inevitably too complex for most people to understand. Therefore, the vast majority of people adopt "simplifying models" for understanding complex political issues - models that lead to misconceptions (Edelman 2001, 4). Furthermore, most people simply are not interested in politics, and have no aspiration to a political life; given the option of participating in politics or not, they willingly defer to the authority of others (Edelman 1977, 137). Political leaders, in filling that role of authority, assuage people's anxiety "about the comprehensive function played in human affairs by chance, ignorance, and [the] inability to comprehend, plan, and take responsibility for remote and complicated contingencies" (Edelman 1964, 77).

For Edelman, then, the complicated nature of political reality makes some sort of political division of labor natural and inevitable. The symbolic function of the leader, and of politics in general, responds to followers' need to make sense of the too-complicated reality that they are asked to govern. But as Edelman saw it, symbols also misinform the naturally apathetic public and further contribute to its quiescence. The symbolic and "spectacular" nature of politics - in the sense of politics being a series of spectacles that a disengaged public fitfully observes, rather than an activity in which it actively engages - is thus both an effect and a cause of public passivity and ignorance. To put matters another way, since perfect public knowledge of, and total absorption in, politics are impossible ideals, it is necessarily true that any democratic politics would require some degree of disengagement, in turn inviting the use of simplifying models and heuristics. Public ignorance therefore serves as a key starting point of Edelman's thought, and it also contributes to the overall bleakness of his worldview - if we seek in politics the emancipation of the masses from domination by the elites, as Edelman, the disillusioned New Leftist, seems at first to have done (Bennett 2005; DeCanio 2005). But should we follow

Edelman, and Fenster, in this normative aspiration?

Fenster ([2005](#), 373) is right to suggest that Edelman held little or no hope for political reform; he saw political symbolization as inevitable and self-sustaining. Fenster concludes that "Edelman's is at least as dark a view of politics as Marx's, but it suggests an even darker possibility: that there is no post-revolutionary future" (ibid.). But Fenster never explains why we should share his view, and Edelman's, that the description of politics provided by Edelman is bleak rather than merely realistic; or why quiescence is necessarily an undesirable political condition. Indeed, would we really want to live in a future "post-revolutionary" age remade by political action undertaken by an ignorant public?

Situating him in the intellectual context of mass-society theorists, who were similarly pessimistic about the positive political role that a mass public might play, Fenster (2006, 374-79) compares Edelman's position with that of the early Walter Lippmann, who saw mass culture and mass society as insulating political power from an ignorant public; and Harold Lasswell, who thought political experts should use propaganda to lead the masses. Lippmann and Lasswell did not believe that quiescence was a negative political outcome, and Fenster provides no reason to differ from them by supposing that a functional democracy requires a fully informed and fully engaged public. Similarly, almost all of the thinkers whom Fenster cites as offering redress for Edelman's shortcomings, from Antonio Gramsci and Pierre Bourdieu to more recent contributors to the cultural-studies tradition, tend to share the Marxist, post-Marxist, or at least generally leftist assumptions that political domination and political quiescence are undesirable, and that the goal of politics (or of the study of politics) should be the emancipation of the masses. These assumptions presuppose that the dominated masses would be better at discerning their own interests - or the general interest - than are modern mass democracies, whose leaders, cultural-studies theorists tend simply to assert, are pursuing the interests of an economic, social, and political elite at the expense of the general good or the good of the many. This presupposition, in the light of findings such as Converse's, borders on fantasy.

Like the cultural-studies theorists, Fenster never considers the possibility that public ignorance and mass quiescence are inevitable in mass democracies, or that more active political participation by the masses may not facilitate positive political effects. Instead, Fenster seems primarily concerned, like Edelman, with how culture and politics *reproduce political domination* in a negative sense, never interrogating the ideological assumptions that underlie and motivate that concern.

Culture as an Independent Sphere

Fenster's insistence on symbolic discourse as an instrument of political domination reduces cultural inquiry into an investigation of "ideologies," defined in quasi-Marxist terms as a tool of mass manipulation. Fenster ([2005](#), 371) here appeals to Clifford Geertz, who in [1964](#) issued a manifesto for the cultural study of politics that would explore ideology. However, it is vital in this context to not conflate symbol, culture, or discourse per se with ideology. As Geertz ([1964](#),

63) defined it, ideology provides "the authoritative concepts that render [politics] meaningful, the suasive images by means of which it can be easily grasped." My emphasis here is on the words *meaningful* and *easily*. Ideology, according to Geertz, generates meaning through the construction of "schematic images of social order [through which] ...man makes himself for better or worse a political animal" (ibid.). But there are, one might think, degrees of meaningfulness that correspond to degrees of intellectual engagement with politics.

The term *liberal* might "mean" quite a bit to a politically engaged government official, whose high level of political interest is made *easier* through the adoption of ideological lenses, than to an automotive mechanic who doesn't follow politics, and who therefore needs simpler symbolic referents than ideology. The degree to which a symbolic discourse is ideological for either the official or the mechanic is contingent upon its ability to signify *systematically* and therefore meaningfully (Converse [1964] 2006, sec. III). Viewed this way, the public official may be *more* "ideologically" constrained than the ordinary citizen, over whom, according to cultural studies, ideology exercises its constraining influence.

Fenster (2006, 372) indicts Edelman for his failure to articulate a "clear, robust theory of ideology," but he doesn't tell us what Edelman could have taken from "ideology" theorists specifically, or scholars within the field of cultural studies more generally, that would have coherently illuminated the real process through which cultural and symbolic discourses influence political opinion making. By first looking at Gramsci's theory of ideological "hegemony," then turning to the empirical sociology and anthropology of Pierre Bourdieu, and finally examining the broader range of cultural-studies literature that Fenster condemns Edelman for ignoring, I will assess whether Edelman really missed very much by failing to take "cultural studies" into account. Whatever the virtues of "cultural-studies" approaches, I will conclude, they fail to explain the process by which cultural and symbolic discourse help to influence and even to form political opinions. Instead, they rely on empirically dubious, politically motivated theories of ideology.

Although Edelman was far from decisive in articulating the relationship between culture and politics, clearly he saw them as mutually sustaining. Culture - including the messages sent by the mass media, artists, educators, family members, and religious institutions - helps to constitute systems of belief and meaning that, in turn, produce political action (or inaction). The interaction between culture and politics is not unidirectional, though, because political actions also have a constitutive effect on political symbols and systems of belief.

As Fenster (2005, 372) reconstructs Edelman's thought, it is unclear "whether the state produced or was produced by the system of political symbols he identifies - or whether some more complex interrelationship" exists. For instance, Edelman (1971, 41; 2001, 43) explicitly identified governmental action as a cause of political cognition. The illusion of political legitimacy is created by the (itself illusory) concept of public opinion foisted on people deliberately. "Public opinion" is generated through inadequate, misleading surveys and, of course, elections; it is then used to justify political actions that, in turn, produce political opinions within the public. Since political action partly determines political cognition, political elites who undertake political actions of which the public supposedly approves may manipulate mass

opinion. On the other hand, political elites are subject to political symbols themselves (Edelman 1971, 10). The same is true of cultural elites - although, as Fenster does not note, a major source of ambiguity is that Edelman fails to distinguish adequately and systematically between political and cultural elites - which is crucial, because media messages and works of art generated by cultural elites "are the key determinants of belief for most of the population" (Edelman 2001, 36).

In Edelman's thought, then, the politics of culture and the culture of politics reinforce each other in obscure ways, and into this obscurity, Fenster points out, creeps a deterministic view of culture as the conscious or unconscious tool of elite interests. As Fenster aptly puts it, Edelman "posited a hierarchy of symbolic production, elite manipulation, and passive reception in which the public is subject to a symbolic spectacle exploited and largely controlled by a privileged minority" (Fenster 2005, 371).

Gramsci's notion of "hegemony" provides a valuable alternative to Edelman's ambiguity, Fenster believes, since it replaces the deterministic notion of mass domination, which had defined previous Marxist theories of "ideology," with a vision of culture as an independent sphere of ideological engagement and therefore, potentially, conflict. Gramscian ideological "hegemony" means that the leadership of elites is exerted consciously and unconsciously through culture, which is independent in the sense of not being reduced to messages that serve the interests of the dominant class. By accepting the leadership of the dominant elite within this cultural sphere, the dominated actively accept the terms of their domination.

The subtleties to which Gramsci can lead are epitomized in the work of cultural-studies scholar Stuart Hall, who in the early 1980s used hegemony theory to help account for the different interpretations of cultural messages at which the recipients of those messages might arrive. Derridean post-structuralism had turned the emphasis away from authorial intention and the search for the fixed meaning of texts to the act of interpretation. For Hall, the meaning of a cultural text is constituted through the interpretive act of reception; this opens the door to ideological control being *contested* by individuals who, depending on their social positions, may produce negotiated and oppositional readings of a text, not passively absorbing the reading that would be consistent with the dominant ideology.

This approach offers more nuance than either earlier versions of Marxism or the mass-society approach, according to which "the 'public' had become, well, a mass: a docile blob, plastic enough to be easily shaped by cultural messages" (Fenster 2005, 376). Edelman, who took the latter approach, saw "the public as a largely undifferentiated entity, bereft of agency and manipulated by mass culture" (ibid.). Fenster's appeal to hegemony theory allows for activity, not passivity, on the receiving end of cultural messages. In Hall's account, for example, cultural meaning and ideology are contingent on the reader, viewer, or interpreter, and are intimately connected to that individual's sense of identity within the broader social landscape. Identity, however, is conceived not as a fixed essence, but as an unstable position within history and culture. Through hegemonic leadership, ideology and other systems of domination are indeed reproduced, but the possibility of oppositional responses to ideology is also preserved.

Edelman, too, saw a relationship between an individual's orientation to myths of a symbolic social order and her sense of identity or her conception of self (though his articulation of the issue characteristically lacked the nuance of the cultural-studies work on the topic).[2] For example, he postulated that one's attitude towards racial equality would coincide with a more general sense of the historical and mythic claims for or against equality, and with one's position within that narrative of history and morality (Edelman 1971, 19). He similarly addressed the roles that education and historical myth play in the inculcation of a sense of national identity (ibid., 165). Further steps in such "cultural" directions are to the good, but why are they as crucial as Fenster would have us believe, and why must they adhere to the form they have taken in the cultural-studies movement? The New Left, from which cultural studies grew, staked its own identity on separating itself from the undemocratic tyrannies that had been imposed earlier in the twentieth century in the name of Marxism. For New Left scholars, therefore, it often became important to show that even the most dominated mass public has participatory potential, and therefore need not be led by a Leninist "vanguard" that morphs into a totalitarian state. The people can revolt on their own initiative, and the first step is for them to produce contestory interpretations of the "ideology" - i.e., the symbolic rationales for capitalist oppression - that they receive from elites.

However, Edelman's emphasis on the cognitive function of symbolic politics calls into question not only whether mass participation is likely, but whether it is a good thing. So his lack of subtlety about whether messages can be interpreted differently by different people is fatal to his project only if we beg the larger political questions raised by the project itself. And while there is little doubt that the "hegemony" approach is more nuanced than were both earlier versions of Marxism and the mass-society approach, nuance does not necessarily bring large gains in accuracy. Hegemony theory is built on the assumption that what is going on in capitalist societies is usually the domination of the masses - however contested their domination may be - through the leadership of coalitions of interests that Gramsci termed "historical blocs." This view assumes a dialectical relationship between economics and culture. Accordingly, whatever its merits relative to other variants of Marxism, hegemony theory still assigns a causal, albeit mediated, role to economic interest within the realms of politics and culture, and therefore gets backwards what we know of the workings of ideology among elites and masses.

Converse demonstrated that "ideologically constrained belief systems are necessarily more common in upper than in lower social strata," and that the largely ignorant masses are not only unrestrained by ideologies, but oblivious to them (Converse [1964] 2006, 56-57). The political views of *elites* are those that tend to be constrained by "abstract, 'ideological' principles" (ibid, 10); they are the truly passive ones, dupes, as it were, of the "creative synthesizers" of the belief systems they have been taught (ibid., 8) - synthesizers such as Marx (ibid., 7) or, we might add, Gramsci. Meanwhile, the very masses that, according to hegemony theory, are actively contesting ideological messages are, in reality, focused on "recognizable social groupings or charismatic leaders" and on "such objects of immediate experience as family, job, and immediate associates," which are "simple, concrete, or 'close to home'" (ibid., 10-11). Converse's findings make it difficult to maintain that most members of the public follow an ideology of the sort that can be ascribed to cultural elites, whether in whole or in contested part: "Parallel to ignorance and confusion over ...ideological dimensions among the less informed is a general decline in

constraints among specific belief elements that such dimensions help to organize. It cannot therefore be claimed that the mass public shares ideological patterns of belief with relevant elites" (ibid., 34). This takes us quite far from the social reality originally conceived by Gramsci, in which all members of society engage in some kind of ideological life, regardless of their official intellectual function or lack thereof.[3] In Converse's analysis, ideology loses its valence as a potential explanation for mass political behavior, and elite behavior, which *is* (by Converse's definition of "elite") ideological, is determined more by "the history of ideas" than by class interest or privilege (ibid., 66).

Edelman ([1971](#), 5) was aware of Converse's work and even cited it, but he dismissed Converse's conclusions by asserting they were "partial statements or overstatements." Yet Edelman offered no evidence, beyond pure conjecture, for this dismissal. And the implications of Converse's study for Edelman's work are serious and manifold - as they are for cultural studies and, consequently, for Fenster's attempt to substitute that tradition for Edelman's thought.

As Fenster (2006, 371) articulates the issue, Edelman was concerned with the issue of "*how* people believe, and how their beliefs are shaped by the symbolic universe they inhabit." But while politically symbolic inputs may be a constitutive element of most people's opinion formation, we cannot expect this influence to occur in a consistent, coherent way, as it would if we reduce symbols and culture to ideology. For example, culture might predispose a member of the mass public to respond positively to rhetoric and imagery in favor of a free market; an individual may even make an isolated voting decision based upon such rhetoric and imagery; but that same individual could not necessarily be relied on to make voting decisions that are, on the whole, consistent with capitalism - let alone with the specific interests of capitalists. Imagery and discourse about "the free market" may come to have some symbolic value for the individual, but if those symbols do not constitute an organizing system of ideas, their practical effect may be negligible. Thus, Converse ([[1964](#)] 2006, 51-52) showed not only that there was no consistently *liberal or conservative* influence at work among the mass public, but that people's political attitudes are so unstable over time that they can hardly reflect a hidden pattern generated by some ideology other than liberalism and conservatism.

The lack of consistent ideological effects displayed by the relatively uninformed masses is therefore unlikely to constitute, as Hall might have it, an oppositional or negotiated decoding of a cultural discourse encoded with a dominant ideology. It is more likely to reflect a relative inability to decode that discourse, or a lack of interest in even hearing it, let alone decoding it. Messages unreceived are messages uninterpreted. At most, cultural reception, at the mass level, involves the generation of impressions that may shape or be trumped by equally vague predispositions. On the other hand, elite political beliefs *do* tend to be constrained by ideology (as more than just a matter of definition: cf. Jennings 1992). So while the political symbols produced by members of political elites, who are more likely to be ideologues, may bear the coherent imprint of ideological *cultural* elites (acting either consciously or unconsciously), such that political discourse is *ideological,* it does not follow that cultural discourses *reproduce ideology* among members of the mass public - let alone a capitalist ideology that is *meaningful* enough to produce political results that are friendly to the ruling class. If we start out from the assumption that capitalist ideology is reproduced through culture, we may never consider the

possibility either that culture has truly independent, non-economic sources among elites (sources stemming from the path-dependent history of ideas); or that it has a truly subtle - i.e., inconsistent and intermittent - influence on mass politics.

Cultural studies was faced with the dilemma of squaring the high hopes that had to be invested in the masses by the New Left with the presumption that the economic order accepted by the masses is exploitative. The cultural-studies solution was to conceive of culture as a vital, perhaps definitive ideological battleground between elites and masses. Gramscian theory provided cultural studies with an explanatory model for how this process might work. In reality, though, it seems that most people do not "have" ideologies and therefore do not "get" ideologies, either from culture or anywhere else. As long as we fail to distinguish the culturally derived impressions, orientations, and perceptions about political matters that govern most popular political behavior from more systematic and expansive notions of "ideology" that are accurately applied only to political elites, and as long as we continue to think that elite ideology must in some way reflect economic interests, we will continue to view elites and masses as engaged in a struggle over economics that attributes too much self-awareness to both masses and elites. The only reality captured by this view is the view of reality determined by the *ideological* prism of cultural studies itself.

The Cultural Creation of Status

As Fenster (2005, 371) notes, the study of how people believe "deals as much with those ideas and matters that are absent and un-thought, or that lie outside the symbols that are available for expression and reception, as with those that are considered." For this reason, Fenster endorses Bourdieu's rejection of the Marxist emphasis on ideology as an instrument of *overt* class struggle, and his alternative focus on "habitus" - the objectification of the shared subjective experience of members of a social group (including those belonging to a class), and the corresponding "ethos" that emerges through these shared experiences (Bourdieu 1977, 72-87). As habitus and ethos are naturalized, according to Bourdieu, individuals come to take this objectification of the subjective for granted, thereby experiencing "doxa" (ibid., 164) - the "absent and un-thought" ideas and concerns that ensure the perpetuation of systems of domination. Active ideological contestation was far less important for Bourdieu than domination established through this naturalizing process: "The most successful ideological effects are those which have no need of words, and ask no more than complicitous silence" (ibid., 188).

In his 1984 ethnography of then-contemporary France, Bourdieu turned explicitly to the question of political behavior. Unlike Edelman, Bourdieu pursued a methodological approach that combined survey research with theory. But he shared Edelman's deep pessimism about the passivity of the masses and their exclusion from politics, as well as Edelman's political commitment to opposing the symbolic systems that supposedly perpetuate elite domination. Bourdieu's view of politics was related to a perceived dearth of real political choices available to the French public. Political surveys, and politics in general, present already-articulated political options to a public that has no role in crafting those options. Since an individual must express her

own political beliefs by choosing among one of these limiting options - the content of which is determined by political elites - personal opinion is itself a kind of fabrication, "a supply meeting a demand" (Bourdieu 1984, 398-99). The predetermination of political choices limits the range of the politically thinkable and encourages either doxa or a spurious experience of political choice - "allodoxa" (ibid., 460-63). Those not directly involved in shaping and contesting political problems "only have some chance of picking out the opinions which 'suit' them from within a universe of ready-made opinions" (ibid., 430).

At its most basic level, there is a powerful insight here about how the illusion of normative authority is constructed through the forced option of either choosing between a few inadequate positions or abstaining altogether. If a voter wants to participate in politics at all, he must identify his own opinion as being the one option, among the few available, that he perceives as most closely approximating his own.

Bourdieu was as concerned with why people abstain from such choices as with the distorting and legitimating effects of non-abstention. The highly specialized language of politics, policy, political discourse, and political survey questionnaires establishes an implicit assumption of competence in those making political responses. In order to respond to a political question, one has to be *capable* and *qualified* by virtue of understanding this language (Bourdieu 1984, 398-400). Implicit in the language, discourse, and practice of politics is a perception of the "right to speak." An individual responds to a political question because she has the education, knowledge, and corresponding status that allow her to comprehend the question, formulate a response, and articulate that response. Individuals of a lower social status are more likely to respond to questions that relate directly to their own experiences or their moral or ethical positions than to more symbolic, technical, or policy-oriented questions, because they are neither competent, nor are they authorized through a perception of competence, to respond to the latter (ibid., 405-17).

Here we return to the question of voter ignorance, albeit from a slightly different perspective than Edelman's. Lacking the political capital to participate in the process actively, the masses heretofore termed "ignorant" (itself perhaps a problematic adjective in this context due to its pejorative connotation; as Bourdieu might have it, the use of the term discursively establishes a perception of incompetence and therefore reinforces a hierarchy of political capital) have no choice but to attempt to make sense of political questions and respond as well as possible, using their own experience or mere values as a benchmark for how to choose among technical policy options often representing different means to the same ends; or to withdraw altogether, abdicating participation and assuming a position of apathy. The technical ability to produce an opinion is actually dependent on feeling oneself to be socially competent to produce an opinion: "the propensity to speak politically, even in the most rudimentary way …is strictly proportionate to the sense of having the right to speak" (ibid., 411). Those who are ignorant of the technical knowledge needed to produce such an opinion have no such right.

In Bourdieu, as in Edelman, the effect of political culture is to render the public quiescent, and the culture of politics serves effectively to reproduce systems of domination. However, Bourdieu de-emphasized conscious top-down ideological reproduction. In one revealing example, he offered evidence against the explicit ideological force of the news media, noting that people in

lower social strata tend not to share political opinions with the newspaper they read (Bourdieu 1984, 440-42); the people in his study got information, not ideology, from their newspapers. The problem, for Bourdieu, is not that culture produces a set of bundled political beliefs (that is, ideologies) with a pro-capitalist content; but that the *form* of political discourse and culture instantiate social hierarchies, excluding much of the public from political participation and thereby perpetuating those hierarchies.

This emphasis on people's differential social and political capital supplies an explanatory framework for mass quiescence largely missing in Edelman: the symbolic nature of politics excludes the dominated from participating in the political process, and even from being able to make political decisions, through the instantiation and perception of their politically ignorant social status. The public's technical "ignorance" (again, my term) performs this pacifying function in two ways - both of which are debatable.

First, culture establishes hierarchies that exclude most people from the field of ideological *production*. While this is clearly true in a sense, it is also true that participation in the creation of political opinions will always be limited by people's interest and their ability to meet some sort of minimum knowledge requirement; in order to participate in politics, people will always need to have a political opinion and also the desire, as well as the wherewithal, to express it (such that, again, a "political division of labor" may be inevitable, unless people's propensity for politics, and their knowledge of it, is homogeneous).

Second, Bourdieu maintains that the culturally produced perception of incompetence leads many to abstain from political participation. The relatively high numbers of people who vote, however, suggests that the public participates in the political process at a rate that is far higher than its actual competence: people are more likely to vote than they are to be informed about the issues (Friedman 1998). Bourdieu argued that people perceive themselves as incompetent and therefore withdraw from the political process; in reality, people seem to participate in the political process - albeit in a casual and sporadic way - despite the fact that they lack the technical knowledge and training necessary to make informed or consistent choices. They are incompetent but they don't know it.

Bourdieu's account still leaves us with serious unanswered questions that demand a more expansive approach to the study of politics and culture. Why do the ignorant masses participate in the political process as much as they do, and how does culture influence their political opinions when they do so? Given the fact that some people will always be more interested and informed about politics than others, how could we possibly eliminate hierarchies of political competence, and what would be the benefit of doing so - absent Bourdieu's and Edelman's New Left normative assumptions about democracy? Though his approach was (like Gramsci's) more subtle than Edelman's, especially in its integration of ethnographic study with theory, Bourdieu, like Edelman, may well have asked the wrong questions, born of his own normative presuppositions. Why should the focus of political-culture research be on such questions as "How do culture and politics instantiate quiescence, apathy, and domination?" and "How can culture be used to the end of political emancipation, if at all?" One might instead ask such questions as: "How does culture influence the way people think about politics, if they do at all?"

and "How do political beliefs get expressed or understood through culture or symbolic systems of meaning?"

"Ideology" and Ignorance

Fenster concludes his critique of Edelman by referring to a body of literature in cultural studies and communications theory featuring still more approaches to symbolic politics. Fenster (2005, 384) argues that "although Edelman clearly kept abreast of the …interdisciplinary convergence of efforts to study the relationships among power, social structure, and culture, he had little interest in exploring the complexity of symbolic meaning or the social contexts in which individuals make meaning of politics." True.

There is little doubt that scholars interested in the intersection of culture and politics should, in principle, study "the complexity of symbolic meaning" and the real "social contexts" of political meaning-making. Such efforts demand a broad range of scholarly methods, a truism confirmed by the sheer quantity of names Fenster produces when discussing recent work on the subject. This massive undertaking may require that we examine the production of cultural products and media as an industrial and institutional process, as Joseph Turow (1997) sought to do; and that we may also need to consider the act of cultural reception not as a theoretical or institutional construct, but as a highly individualized, variable process, as Ien Ang (1991) did in her work within the cultural-studies subdiscipline of audience studies. Turow and Ang are also fine examples of writers interested in the study of culture who also show a willingness to distance themselves, either practically (Turow) or theoretically (Ang), from Marxist traditions of thought.

Yet many of the thinkers Fenster names share his (and Edelman's) emphasis on cultural domination and popular quiescence, and emancipatory political goals continue to dominate the field of cultural studies and define the discipline's terms of debate. William Gamson identified a central concern for cultural studies scholars in his declaration that "it is not through force or coercion that a regime maintains itself but through its ability to shape our worldview" (Gamson 1992, 65). Contrast the superficially similar view, also reminiscent of Bourdieu, expressed by Lippmann ([1922] 1949, 65): "The perfect stereotype …precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception; imposes a cerain character on the data of our senses before the data reach our intelligence." The shaping of political perceptions is a concern Lippmann shares with later cultural-studies theorists, but Lippmann does not presuppose that this shaping produces political "domination" by a "regime," or that such a regime is class-based, or that the perceptions of most people are not fragmentary "stereotypes" but full-blown "ideologies" that sustain capitalism.

Where, a cultural-studies scholar (or a political scientist) might ask, are the mechanisms of "power" in Lippmann's view? They are nowhere; they are replaced by mechanisms of cognition. Such mechanisms, being supposedly universal and possibly insurmountable, might be said to predispose Lippmann to a "conservative" worldview. But that is only axiomatically bad if one begs the question against such a worldview by assuming that political ignorance and passivity are impositions of "power" that might and should be successfully resisted. One could, of course,

adduce evidence to that effect, but the cultural-studies literature that Fenster assures us is so compelling does no such thing. The cultural-studies project is to *illuminate* the mechanisms whereby the masses' "ideological" worldviews are defined, and its identities established, by systems of power. That such worldviews and systems exist is simply assumed. Cultural studies itself partakes of an ideological worldview. A less doctrinaire version of cultural studies might examine, among other things, where the "cultural studies" ideology itself comes from.

Fenster offers the cultural-studies literature on political extremism as an exemplary corrective to the failings of Edelman's work. Unfortunately, that literature also serves as a case study of the unfortunate influence of the ideological biases of cultural studies. For example, Jodi Dean (2002, 52-53) defines conspiracy theorizing as a symptom of a larger ideology of public reason and publicity that protects

global capitalism in its assumption that communicative expansion enhances democracy.... . Instead of public deliberation, we have private acts of consumption. Instead of public governance, we have the privatized control of corporations. Instead of rule through thoughtful deliberation, we have the compulsive force of markets. (Ibid., 13)

Dean, however, merely assumes that "public deliberation" can be "thoughtful," and that it is blocked by "global capitalism," which subtly forces people to consume instead of engaging in political deliberation.

Dean also endorses the pervasive and dubious assumption that emancipation, on almost any terms, would be preferable to extant systems of domination. Indeed, referring to the 1999 film *The Matrix*, Dean (2002, 165) conjectures that whatever the price, struggle against domination would be better than blissful ignorance ("choose the worst," she insists) (contrast Niemi 2003). Furthermore, she leaves no meaningful way of distinguishing the vast, amorphous variety of "ideology" that she describes from more specific, bundled sets of beliefs and assumptions that may or - as the existence of her own anticapitalist assumptions suggests - may not be reproduced by the allegedly pervasive cultural "power" of "global capitalism"; and that may or, as research such as Converse's suggests, probably are not reproduced among the masses.[4] If we ask where political beliefs and assumptions actually come from, Dean's application of the all-encompassing cultural-studies view of "ideology" provides a politically predetermined answer whose own rationale is at least as obscure as anything in Edelman. This answer has little or nothing to say about the specific political attitudes that people hold, and the policies that are adopted, in "capitalist" regimes.

Fenster takes a different, but no less ideologically implicated, approach in his own work on conspiracy theories. He describes belief in vast conspiracies as a populist ideological response to elite domination: conspiracy theories "ideologically address real structural inequities and constitute a response to a withering civil society and the concentration of the ownership of the means of production, which together leave the political subject without the ability to be recognized or to signify in the public realm" (Fenster 1999, 67). Fenster sees a utopian, populist possibility in conspiracy theory, although he believes that in fact it fails as a populist political project, especially once we take into account the complicating factors of class, race, and gender

(ibid., 226). There are valuable insights to be gained from Fenster's specific readings of conspiracy theories' texts, tropes, and symbols, as well as his hypotheses regarding their underlying logic, but I am inclined to agree with Peter Knight's objection that Fenster's work is indicative of a broader tendency within cultural studies to look for "hidden utopian yearnings buried deep within popular culture …which can be rearticulated to more productive political projects," a tendency that "can end up insisting that other (usually less sophisticated) people's everyday cultural practices fulfill one's own political agenda - and then chastising them for failing at what they never intended in the first place" (Knight 2001, 21).

Unlike Knight (2001, 21), though, I am not convinced that the search for "hidden utopian yearnings" within popular culture is "an extremely important task for cultural analysis," for this relies on the presupposition that the masses do object to a domination that is only assumed, never demonstrated; that they do object, in truth, for no other reason that, according to cultural-studies theorists, they *should* object; and, further, that the expression of their emancipatory interests is embedded within their cultural discourses. Working under the spell of these assumptions, cultural-studies scholars have reduced the study of the politics of culture to the search for elusive hints of popular unrest and resistance to a social order that are rational responses to what the public *must know,* at some level, is an exploitative social order (just as we scholars of culture apparently *just know* the same thing). For those of us who are impressed, as Edelman was, with the possibility of political *ignorance* (others' and, by extension, our own), this is a most unpromising research direction.

Beyond Ideology, and Beyond Positivism

If, as four decades of political-science research seem to establish, voter ignorance is a fact of mass politics, students of politics need to consider the nonrational, or at least undeliberate, causes of political opinion-making, and culture and symbolic systems of meaning (whether or not they function systematically and coherently as ideologies) may plausibly play some role in that process. Language, art, news and entertainment media, and cultural institutions provide people with most of the information they have about the political world, and they also contribute to a general sense of the politically and socially possible. But these are processes that do not readily lend themselves to the type of statistical research on which the public-ignorance literature is grounded, beyond which it has not appreciably progressed. "A cultural, symbolic analysis" of politics, Fenster (2005, 372) argues credibly, "could enlighten efforts to find and explain the conditions of ignorance and irrationality better than can statistical work or a priori modeling."

But this "cultural, symbolic analysis" is also a difficult proposition. Edelman rejected a behavioralist approach to it because of his concern that the putative objectivity of the social scientist was really a mask for interpretive bias. Yet Edelman's own methodology, if it can be called a methodology at all, was to write ideologically inflected interpretations of social and political practice (Fenster 2006, 379-83). Edelman's shortcomings did not lie, as Fenster argues, in his failure to articulate or refer to a theory of ideology, but instead in his dogmatic adherence

to his own ideological convictions.

The difficulty that arises when scholars study the meanings and effects of cultural discourse, if Converse was right, is that scholars themselves, as members of the highly educated and politicized elite, are more likely to have an ideological position - and therefore an interpretive bias - than the public whose opinion-making processes they are trying to describe. This is certainly true of the cultural-studies movement, a sizable number of whose members explicitly see themselves as performing an "emancipatory" function (e.g., Denning 2004, 164), and the rest of whom, explicitly or not, have almost universally accepted the theoretical assumptions that go with such a political stance. The study of culture, rather than helping us to better understand how people make decisions, has instead often served as a political tool.

It is probably impossible to examine political opinion-making without analyzing cultural discourse, no matter how much survey research and political psychology also contribute. But it is also impossible to analyze how others interpret culture without recognizing our own interpretive frameworks as cultural products. It is for this reason that the cultural study of politics requires us to turn away from the "cultural studies" that Fenster recommends.

Notes

1. Bourdieu (1984, 464-65) similarly likened politics to a form of theatre that, in its exclusivity, breeds distrust and, ultimately, apathy in those who are dominated by the political order. For Bourdieu, apathy and distrust are effects of the symbolic, exclusionary nature of politics; for Edelman, the causal relationships are less clear.

2. For Edelman, there is a dimension of social role-taking that also seems to echo, in distant ways, Louis Althusser's influential theory of ideological reproduction (Althusser [1970] 2001), in which the subject is constituted (or misrecognizes him- or herself)) through ideology. The subject accepts a position within an ideological "state apparatus" (e.g., a school, the media, a church), and thereby becomes subject to, and a "subject" through, ideology. Althusser's view had a profound effect on early work in cultural studies, though Gramsci's theory of hegemony largely supplanted Althusserian theoretical models.

3. "All men are intellectuals," wrote Gramsci (1971, 9), "but not all men have in society the function of intellectuals…. Each man …carries on some form of intellectual activity …[and] participates in a particular conception of the world, has a conscious line of moral conduct, and therefore contributes to a conception of the world or to modify it, that is, to bring into being new modes of thought."

4. In building her theoretical model, Dean draws on Slavoj Žižek's (1989) deft reinvention of ideology theory, via Jacques Lacan, which frames ideology as the belief that underlies action. Ideological belief persists regardless of any knowledge that would seem to contradict or undermine the belief; indeed, a belief reveals its ideological nature most powerfully in making sense of an action that makes no rational sense. Thus, for example, the ideology of voting manifests itself not in a belief that one's vote makes a difference, but rather in the fact that one votes despite *knowing* one's vote does not make a difference.

REFERENCES

1. Althusser, Louis (Brewster, Ben ed.) ([1970] 2001) Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation).. *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* Monthly Review Press , New York

2. Ang, Ien (1991) *Desperately Seeking the Audience* Routledge , London

3. Bennett, Stephen Earl (2005) Populism, Elitism, and the Populist Ideology of Elites: The Reception of the Work of Murray Edelman.. *Critical Review* **17**:(3-4) , pp. 351-366.

4. Bourdieu, Pierre (Nice, Richard ed.) (1977) *Outline of a Theory of Practice* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

5. Bourdieu, Pierre (Nice, Richard ed.) (1984) *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass

6. Converse, Philip E. ([1964] 2006) The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 1-74.

7. Converse, Philip E. and Roy, Pierce (1986) *Political Representation in France* Harvard University Press , Cambridge, Mass

8. Dean, Jodi (2002) *Publicity's Secret* Cornell University Press , Ithaca

9. DeCanio, Samuel (2005) Murray Edelman on Symbols and Ideology in Democratic Politics.. *Critical Review* **17**:(3-4) , pp. 339-350.

10. Denning, Michael (2004) *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* Verso , London

11. Edelman, Murray (1964) *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* University of Illinois Press , Urbana

12. Edelman, Murray (1971) *Politics as Symbolic Action: Mass Arousal and Quiescence*

Academic Press , New York

13. Edelman, Murray (1977) *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail* Academic Press , New York

14. Edelman, Murray (1988) *Constructing the Political Spectacle* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

15. Edelman, Murray (2001) *The Politics of Misinformation* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

16. Fenster, Mark (1999) *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* University of Minnesota Press , Minneapolis

17. Fenster, Mark (2005) Murray Edelman: Polemicist of Public Ignorance.. *Critical Review* **17**:(3-4) , pp. 367-391.

18. Friedman, Jeffrey (1998) Public Ignorance and Democratic Theory.. *Critical Review* **12** , pp. 397-411.

19. Gamson, William A. (Morris, Aldon D. and Mueller, Carol McClurg eds.) (1992) Social Psychology of Collective Action.. *Frontiers of Social Movement Theory* Yale University Press , New Haven

20. Geertz, Clifford (Apter, David E. ed.) (1964) Ideology As a Cultural System.. *Ideology and Discontent* Free Press of Glencoe , New York

21. Gramsci, Antonio (Hoare, Quintin and Nowell-Smith, Geoffrey eds.) (1971) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks* International Publishers , New York

22. Hall, Stuart (Hall, Stuart, Hobson, Dorothy, Lowe, Andrew and Willis, Paul eds.) (1980) Encoding/Decoding.. *Culture, Media, Language* Hutchinson , London [crossref]

23. Hall, Stuart (Gurevitch, Michael, Bennett, Tony, Curran, James and Woollacott, Janet eds.) (1982) The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': The Return of the 'Repressed' in Media Studies.. *Culture, Society, and the Media* Methuen , London

24. Knight, Peter (2001) *Conspiracy Culture: From Kennedy to "The X-Files."* Routledge , London

25. Lippmann, Walter ([1922] 1949) *Public Opinion* Free Press , New York

26. Niemi, Alison (2003) Film as Religious Experience.. *Critical Review* **15**:(3-4) , pp. 435-446.

27. Turow, Joseph (1997) *Media Systems in Society: Understanding Industries, Strategies, and*

Power 2nd ed, Longman , New York

28. Žižek, Slavoj (1989) *The Sublime Object of Ideology* Verso , New York

Mark Fenster

On Idiocratic Theory: Rejoinder to Wisniewsky

Abstract

One of Murray Edelman's most important insights was that understanding public ignorance about politics and policy requires an analysis of how symbolic communication and popular culture shape public knowledge and opinion. Approaches that simply dismiss the public as ignorant or idiotic make a similar error as those that simply embrace the modern public as capable of engaging in the work of a competent demos, insofar as both simplify complex social and cultural processes of meaning-making and comprehension. The problem for those who wish to take Edelman's insight seriously - a problem that Edelman failed to resolve - is precisely how to study and theorize the public as something less than deliberative and knowledgeable, but more than simply ignorant.

Introduction

The recent film "Idiocracy" satirically imagines the following scenario: Five hundred years hence, fertile and oversexed stupid people (which may be read as non-elites, or as the working class, or even "the public") have so radically outbred smart people that the United States is run and peopled exclusively by idiots. The president is an idiot, as are the members of his cabinet; corporate executives are idiots; judges are idiots; literally, *everyone is an idiot*. As a result, crops are failing, because they are being watered exclusively with a Gatorade-like liquid; and people spend their time engaged, zombie-like, in shopping and TV watching. The most popular show is a comedy called "Ow, My Balls!" that is little more than a series of genitalia-crushing accidents which befall the show's "star."

These idiots simply cannot rule themselves. With humanity's fate in the balance, and only after a series of complicated plot twists, the government and the public finally recognize their deficiencies and appoint as president a time traveler from the past (our present) whose average intelligence (as measured by our standards) makes him the smartest living creature. Our somewhat dim-witted "hero" saves humanity by insisting on watering the crops, although the film refuses to guarantee that complete idiocy won't reign again.

"Idiocracy" thus suggests what might be called an idiocratic theory: If the public is idiotic, as it surely is, then the least it can do, and the thing it must do in order to survive, is to submit to the rule of those who are its smartest and most capable members (even if the smartest are a bit dim themselves).

What is the relationship between the film's comedic theory of democratic failure and democratic theory generally? I cannot take on that heady question here. Instead, I will use idiocratic theory as a baseline for understanding Murray Edelman's conception of public ignorance, explicating my critique of it (Fenster 2005), and criticizing Chris Wisniewski's partly correct and partly confused reply to my critique.

Edelman described a contemporary *demos* that was amused and manipulated by political symbols that cover darker, more important truths. He offered a tragic version of idiocratic theory. His view of a fallen contemporary political culture resulted from a residual leftist embrace of participatory democratic self-rule as an ideal, even if that embrace seemed to weaken considerably in his later years, as he began to conclude that the ideal would never be realized.

Following Philip E. Converse ([1964] 2006), Wisniewski agrees to a great extent with Edelman's description of public ignorance, but he suggests that Edelman was blind, like any vaguely populist leftist, to the fact that the obstacle to informed, participatory democracy lies neither in the public nor in whatever ruling elite or social structure causes the public's ignorance. In Wisniewski's view, Edelman, like every democratic theory that assumes that the public *can* participate knowledgeably and competently in politics, overlooks the public's limited intelligence, cognitive deficiencies, and inattention to the details and consequences of both politics and policy. Wisniewski does not narrate a tragedy; he offers the hardboiled realism necessary for better understanding and, presumably, for better governance - even if it is less idealistically *democratic* governance.

On a continuum mapping representations of the *demos*, "Idiocracy"'s portrait of a hopeless, unruly mass of fatuous citizens suitable for nothing more than ridicule occupies one pole. At the other extreme sits a thoroughgoing democratic populism that would posit at least the potential emergence of an intelligent, informed, and deliberative public able to govern itself through direct self-rule. Edelman's tragic, hopeless vision of a manipulated public, with Edelman's longings for the unattainable populist ideal, occupies a position close to the idiocratic end, albeit with bitter regret. Edelman's presumptive if largely suppressed hope for a more knowledgeable, less manipulated public, however, positions him a small distance from that extreme.

In some respects, Wisniewski's vision of the public is more hopeless than Edelman's: whether the reasons we should lose hope are ontological, cultural, or genetic (Wisniewski is not entirely clear on this point), the public's ignorance is inevitable and permanent. Again following Converse, Wisniewski flips the standard modernist critique of the mass public, suggesting that the problem is not the ideological manipulation of the public, but an ideologically oblivious intellectual class that foolishly assumes that the public can govern itself. Viewed this way, Wisniewski's position appears consistent with idiocratic theory, but articulates it from the perspective of a realist reporter of fact, rather than that of an ironist or a tragedian.

His hopelessness about the *demos* makes me skeptical about Wisniewski's commitment to the study of political culture. In effect, Wisniewski gives us Edelman without Edelman's residual leftism, leaving us not only with no reason for hope, but no reason to intervene in political culture, and therefore no reason to study it. Indeed, in his later work, Edelman's voice began to

take on the tenor of an obsessive crank: Why keep writing this stuff, one asks, when it can have no positive effect, and you admit as much? Lacking the hope for changing the system of political "symbols" that seems to have animated Edelman's early work, Wisniewski appears to suggest that governance would be more effective when it ignores the public and those elites who delude themselves into believing in the public's democratic potential. But if the public is so incapable of understanding politics and policy and is so unlikely to improve, and if the elites are so ideological that they are unlikely to approach questions of politics and policy honestly and openly, one is left to wonder why Wisniewski thinks it is at all useful or interesting to study the culture of politics that is the joint product of elites and masses. Better and easier, it would seem, to concede the essential truth of Converse's findings and move to more apparently significant matters, such as the implications of that ignorance for normative political theory and positive governance (see Friedman 2006). Wisniewski's rendering of Converse, his critique of Edelman, and his fatalistic reporting of the essential cognitive limits of the public fail, in the end, to produce a case for why culture matters at all - whether one thinks, as he does, that culture is independent from power; that it is merely its superstructure; or, under some more "nuanced" reading that he dismisses (Wisniewski 2007, 132*), that it is somewhere in between.

Having mapped out Wisniewski's relationship to Edelman, let me now clarify my own position. My essay suggested that Edelman could have better conceptualized symbolic communication by incorporating insights from some of the disciplines that have engaged in the qualitative study of the issue, including anthropology, sociology, history, literature, and communications - which are frequently seen as contributing to a broader "cultural turn" in qualitative social sciences, towards an interdisciplinary "cultural studies" project. I argued that Edelman's description and theory of political symbols suffered from simplistic conceptions of the communicative process: in essence, I maintained that the world is not quite as idiocratic as he assumed. Wisniewski rejects my critique largely for two reasons: first, because the disciplines and bodies of work I identify lean (at times heavily and explicitly) to the political left, and thus have embedded within them biases that inevitably limit their descriptive abilities as well as their normative accounts;[1] and second, because they rely on a theory of ideology that posits a truth that their own critiques of symbolic communication undercut.

The bias argument fails to make me reconsider my position because it does not address the empirical, descriptive elements of the fields I discussed, which have no necessary relationship to any political or normative commitments of those fields or of the scholars working within them. During the twentieth century, criticism of "mass" society and culture - much of it expressing similar concerns about the ignorant, passive modern public - emanated from scholars representing both the cultural right and left and the political right and left.[2] Dismissing any such work as the product of mere bias risks missing the significance, and potential validity, of its findings; as well as the important historical fact that analysts of all political stripes agreed about the profound social changes that constituted part of twentieth-century modernity - even if they disagreed, to an extent, in identifying causal changes and the political and cultural implications of those changes. It is no doubt true that the qualitative social sciences of the post-1960s era have been overwhelmingly oriented to the left, but it is equally true that in the study of culture, the left/right distinction is frequently less significant than the paternalistic/libertarian divide: leftists and conservatives can make common cause either in their outrage over the cultural degradation

of contemporary culture or their fear of the heavy hand of the state. Evaluating the contribution and significance of cultural analysis requires more than merely identifying the political commitments of the analysts - indeed, Edelman remains an interesting figure precisely *because* his vision of political symbols seemed to pull him away from his politics.

The underlying issue, in other words, is not bias per se, but the extent to which the social science in question is performed carefully and transparently. As with any humanistic and social-scientific endeavor, both good and poor work has been produced under the rubric of cultural studies. The appearance and ill effects of "bias" in a particular study are symptomatic more of the quality of its scholarship than of its relationship to the political precommitments of its author or her field. Indeed, all studies of human behavior require some set of methodological and conceptual assumptions, which are likely to affect a project and its results. "Bias," as a sole or prevailing basis for critique, either presumes the possibility of a pure, objective, and ultimately mechanical social science - the desire for which drives the endless search for methodological purity that too frequently operates at the expense of meaningful research questions and theory-building - or it entails the impossibility of any social scientific project. But if one concedes that social science is inevitably imperfect and that no methodology perfectly captures social reality, but nevertheless tries to study human behavior both to understand and improve ourselves and society, then the bias critique is at once banal and beside the point. It also diverts attention from the more important issue: the substance of the ideas themselves.

I agree, however, with Wisniewski's argument that the concept of "ideology" creates a significant, frequently unexamined problem for cultural studies, as well as for the study of symbolic political communication generally. The term suffers from two opposite defects: too often it is deployed narrowly as a means of dismissing an opponent's belief system; at other times, it is applied universally, as a more neutral term that refers to the limited consciousness shared by all members of a given society. In the first instance, *ideology* serves as an academic gloss masking simplistic, condescending, and largely unsupported denunciations. This usage is the refuge for shoddy, uninteresting scholarship. The second usage, necessarily abstract and ahistorical because it tries to identify and explain a universally held belief system, begs the question of how anyone can identify and study a universal system of belief either from outside or from within its own ideological constraints.[3]

One way out of this bind is to create a conceptual trapdoor that allows the analyst to claim a scientific position outside of the ideological system he seeks to identify - a cheat that usually enables the analyst to condemn the society under analysis and thereby combine both types of defects in a spectacularly dreadful theory (e.g., Althusser 1978). The other is to accept and self-reflexively concede the difficulty of fully understanding the conditions of knowledge, ignorance, and belief that exist within a present system of belief.[4] Fraught though it may be, this approach offers the best opportunity for any humanistic or social-scientific study of history, culture, or politics.

I agree with Wisniewski if he is arguing that "ideology" in any sense - as a synonym for "wrong"; or as the equivalent of "consciousness"; or, alternatively, in its Marxist, post-Marxist, or Conversean sense - cannot serve as either a sole dependent or independent variable in social-

science research. It is inevitably either too simple as a mode of criticism, or too complex as an object of study.

To be clear, however, my suggestion that Edelman would have offered a better theoretical conception of the public had he developed a better, more explicit theory of ideology was not meant to indicate that such improvement would have made his approach essentially correct. A theory of ideology is neither sufficient nor even necessary for the study of political symbols and culture. Wisniewski has misread my essay by placing me, as a purported representative of cultural studies, in a bifurcated position on the idiocracy continuum. As a result of my instrumentalist theory of ideology, I apparently claim that the public is ignorant to the point of idiocy, because it is a victim of the political, social, and economic order that rules it. At the same time, I purportedly place myself with alleged cultural-studies cohorts on the populist end of the continuum, alongside the radical democratic public that we hope to produce by revealing hidden truths and correct ways of thinking. In other words, Wisniewski argues, I assume idiocracy's existence in practice by suggesting an idiotic, ideologically manipulated public; but I disavow idiocracy as a theory by assuming that the public *could* and some day *will* transcend its current foolishness and throw off the chains of its externally imposed ignorance.

But I did not in fact "insist on symbolic discourse as an instrument of political domination" (Wisniewski 2007, 128); nor am I convinced that cultural studies (which I cannot claim to represent) always does so either - unless one ignores the long march of cultural studies through poststructuralist and postmodern theory and the ethnographic study of the audience, all of which sought to complicate or reject instrumentalist conceptions of ideology.[5] Speaking only for myself, I agree that the public is frequently ignorant, and willfully so, as any number of examples illustrate. The aftermath of the Iraq War, in which broad segments of the public continued to believe in a phantom weapons of mass destruction program and illusory ties to Al-Qaeda, represents just one of many. I have come to agree that the ideal of a knowing, participatory mass public - as well as the embedded assumptions that information, if communicated directly and in an unmediated form, would lead to public knowledge and a set of agreed assumptions on how to proceed - is thoroughly illusory (Fenster 2006).

Converse is correct: the public doesn't know much, and much of what its members do know is wrong; and those who are more knowledgeable are not necessarily more rational, insofar as they inevitably understand and act on what they know through narrowing frameworks of interpretation and heuristics. Notably, however, and contrary to Wisniewski's assertion, Converse's conclusion that the public holds jumbled, incoherent beliefs is not entirely at odds with theories put forward by leading figures in cultural studies. For example, Stuart Hall ([1986] 1996, 43) describes the "fragmentary, disjointed and episodic" thinking that constitutes an historical period's common sense.

That said, Wisniewski is right to disagree with my critique of Edelman because, unlike Edelman and Wisniewski, I am not in fact an idiocrat. As lazy and stupid as the public may be, its members are not incapable of understanding at least the broad stakes of major political decisions. In this regard consider the increased public knowledge and understanding of the nonexistence of Saddam Hussein's WMD program and ties to Al-Qaeda that have occurred over the past three

years. Efforts to provide the public with better information in an effective and timely manner, whether by public or private institutions, are worthwhile, in the same way that efforts to manipulate the public by leaking or releasing false or misleading information can be quite effective.

I may not be as far on the other side of the idiocratic continuum as Wisniewski suggests or might want. But I am heartened, if skeptical, that someone committed to a theory of public ignorance thinks the study of political culture a worthwhile endeavor, and I look forward to the work that results.

Notes

1. Ironically, given the importance of this critique to Wisniewski's dismissal of cultural studies, his own political commitments remain largely unstated. This silence leaves the reader uncertain where his approach to the study of political culture might lead one politically, except that, presumably, it would not be toward a wishful left- (or right-)wing populism. The two most likely commitments that follow from his realist idiocracy are a critical-libertarian critique of the contemporary democratic republic (if the public cannot govern itself, then that democratic government is best that governs least) (see, e.g., Somin 1998); or an authoritarian vision of managerial elitism that could run either vaguely to the left (in the vein of Lasswell or the early Lippmann) or to the right (in the tradition of Pareto and Mosca). Either direction suggests an important distinction between Wisniewski's mode of narration and Edelman's, even though their view of the public is quite similar.

2. I use the modifier "cultural" here because with respect to cultural criticism, the traditional political left/right distinction becomes confusing and unhelpful. A conservative cultural critical tradition existed throughout the twentieth century among artists (such as T. S. Eliot), literary and cultural critics (such as F. R. Leavis, E. D. Hirsch, and Hilton Kramer), and political activists (such as William Bennett) who, following in the tradition of Matthew Arnold, disapproved of what they saw as the vulgarity of popular culture. This tradition, which does not necessarily require commitments to all of the positions associated with the American political right wing, finds some common ground with leftists and radicals (most prominently in the Frankfurt School tradition of Theodor Adorno) who share its embrace of high culture. At the same time, leftist academics in the cultural-studies tradition share their populist embrace of popular culture with libertarians (such as, for example, Virginia Postrel and the current instantiation of *Reason* magazine) on the putative right wing.

3. This is what Clifford Geertz (1973, 194) identified as "Mannheim's paradox," after a dynamic first identified by Karl Mannheim (1936).

4. Jack Balkin's discussion of this issue is quite cogent (1998, ch. 6), even if his "cultural software" analogy does not seem persuasive as a conceptual framework to replace or improve upon "ideology."

5. Wisniewski rightly identifies a tension in my work on conspiracy theory (Fenster 1999). On the one hand, I argue that conspiracy theories represent a misplaced desire for a utopian, transparent, and direct relationship between the people and the state. On the other hand, the book appears to propose that such a relationship is necessary and possible, and that anything less would constitute elite domination. I consider the first thesis supported by the book's analysis of conspiracy theory's texts and practices, but the latter now strikes me as naïve and weak. (This illustrates my earlier point that a normative precommitment does not necessarily negate a work's findings, even if it might affect how one reads the author's interpretation of those findings.) In the second edition I will attempt to address this tension more directly.

REFERENCES

1. Althusser, Louis (Brewster, Ben ed.) ([1970] 1978) Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Towards an Investigation.. *, Lenin and Philosophy* Monthly Review Press , New York

2. Balkin, Jack M. (1998) *Cultural Software: A Theory of Ideology* Yale University Press , New Haven

3. Converse, Philip E. ([1964] 2006) The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.. *Critical Review* **18**:(1-3) , pp. 1-74.

4. Fenster, Mark (2005) Murray Edelman: Polemicist of Public Ignorance.. *Critical Review* **17**:(3-4) , pp. 367-392.

5. Fenster, Mark (2006) The Opacity of Transparency.. *Iowa Law Review* **91** , pp. 885-949.

6. Fenster, Mark (1999) *Conspiracy Theories: Secrecy and Power in American Culture* University of Minnesota Press , Minneapolis

7. Friedman, Jeffrey (2006) Public Competence in Normative and Positive Theory: Neglected Implications of 'The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.'. *Critical Review* **18** , pp. i-xliii.

8. Geertz, Clifford (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures* Basic Books , New York

9. Hall, Stuart (Morley, David and Chen, Kuan-Hsing eds.) ([1986] 1996) The Problem of Ideology: Marxism without Guarantees.. *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* Routledge , London

10. Mannheim, Karl (1936) *Ideology and Utopia* Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch , New York

11. Somin, Ilya (1998) Voter Ignorance and the Democratic Ideal.. *Critical Review* **12**:(4) , pp. 413-458.

12. Wisniewski, Chris (2007) Political Culture vs. Cultural Studies: Reply to Fenster.. *Critical Review* **19**:(1) , pp. 125-145. [informaworld]

Daniel Carpenter

The Leaning Tower of "Pisa": Public Ignorance, Issue Publics, and State Autonomy: Reply to DeCanio

Abstract

In the pages of this journal, Samuel DeCanio and colleagues have advanced the proposition that public ignorance (PI) can lead to state autonomy (SA), inasmuch as the public cannot constrain state actions of which it is unaware. The pisa framework, while original and deserving of further research, needs to take account of complicating factors on both the public ignorance and the state autonomy sides of the equation. "Knowledge," and thus "ignorance," is a matter of diverse interpretations, so what seems like ignorance may actually be a form of fragmented knowledge that buttresses state autonomy. Conversely, public ignorance of state actions that would be popular if they were widely known might diminish state autonomy, by undermining the legitimacy of the state bureaucracy in question.

Introduction

Can public ignorance serve as a durable basis for state or bureaucratic autonomy?

I have substantial doubts. It is true that public ignorance can, in many settings, widen the ambit of state and bureaucratic action, and limit the ability of societies and societal organizations to respond to (or resist) state action. Yet there are countervailing reasons to believe that public ignorance can weaken the state as much as strengthen it.

Thus, while I congratulate Samuel DeCanio for advancing an interesting new hypothesis, I think the hypothesis is too blunt as it stands. The relationships between information, social knowledge, knowledge communities, and state autonomy are far more complicated than any hypothesis resting upon simple univariate causality would suggest. The task of scholarship along these lines should be to advance more refined theoretical statements of DeCanio's "public ignorance/state autonomy" (pisa) thesis, and to conduct more elaborate historical and empirical studies of the relationship between knowledge, its distribution in a society and among state personnel, and state autonomy.

Why Ignorance May Produce Autonomy

Let me begin with a summary of what I take to be DeCanio's main point. In *Critical Review* 14(2-3), DeCanio and other scholars argued that public ignorance could serve as a broad basis

for state autonomy in modern times, particularly given the importance of elections as the pre-eminent constraint upon the states that govern democratic societies.[1] Drawing upon an enduring literature that began with Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" ([1964] 2006), DeCanio (2000, 143) argues that "the key source of democratic states' ability to act autonomously would be public unawareness of state actions," in part because public ignorance is "what allows the nominally democratic state to escape effective societal scrutiny." "Given the public's political ignorance, it is likely that the states governing modern democracies are far more autonomous from social actors than is commonly assumed" (ibid., 145). In subsequent essays in the volume, this public-ignorance hypothesis is described as a major reformulation of Marxian concept of state autonomy (DeCanio 2000b), and is empirically elaborated in studies of cozy relations between state actors and lobbyists (which may reinforce state actors' autonomy from society; Kersh 2000), and in the formulation of foreign policy (Ravenal 2000).

There are some nice features to this argument. DeCanio and his colleagues do acknowledge and respond to the "shortcuts" and "fire alarms" argument popularized by scholars such as Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins (1998), who have tried to mitigate the undemocratic implications of public ignorance by reminding us that voter ignorance can co-exist with highly responsive polities. Parties and interest groups, for example, can provide voters with "shortcuts" (endorsements, advocacy, and "fire-alarm" complaints about wayward government agencies) that can simplify complex problems for voters. DeCanio and colleagues fairly note in response that if the public remains massively ignorant, then all that shortcuts accomplish is to push the moral hazard problem back from the legislative/bureaucratic interface to the voter/interest group interface.

On the whole, pisa is intriguing, and deserving of further analysis, but not incredibly compelling as it now stands. Even if mass publics remain ignorant of public policy and of the state's activities, there are at least two reasons to believe that the state will not be autonomous as a result. One barrier to state autonomy is that some societal organizations can *themselves* exploit public ignorance to advance their interests vis-à-vis the state. The other problem occurs when a lack of public knowledge might undermine the very legitimacy on which the state's power rests.

Propertied Elites Constraining State Autonomy

When DeCanio and colleagues talk of the ignorance of the public, I am reminded of Margaret Thatcher's statement that "there *is* no public."[2] In making that bald claim - and in ignoring the republican political traditions of popular sovereignty that had evolved nowhere more influentially than in her own country - Thatcher was dismissing the notion of a popular will whose claims could override those of individuals. Better to see the units of analysis and governance as individuals and families, she thought.

We need not agree with Thatcher's normative claim to acknowledge that the idea of a single public - and a single condition of "knowledge" or "ignorance" ascribed to that totality - is somewhat farfetched. But if there is no monolithic public with uniform levels of information

across all its members, there might be variegated communities, organizations, and networks of citizens with differing levels of knowledge about the state and its doings. Political scientists and sociologists have therefore studied "issue publics" that are more attentive to particular dimensions of political debate than a randomly chosen citizen would likely be.[3]

The importance of issue publics grows when we allow that a key mechanism of influence over the state is not simply the politics of pressure but also the politics of agenda setting. Well-organized publics and the organizations that represent them can influence not only the decisions of state actors but also the set of problems to which they pay attention.

A couple of examples may help elucidate this argument. Consider first that even in a democratic society (perhaps especially in democratic societies), the state has organized enemies who seek less to overthrow it and more to emasculate its power, compared to the power of the owners of property. These enemies of the state, ironically, are members of what DeCanio and colleagues would call the "ruling class," at least if that term is understood to include wealthy, propertied, and highly educated citizens. Over the past two decades, these and allied forces have successfully privatized many state-level programs and agencies throughout the world, including the postal system and its savings banks in Japan, and numerous state and municipal services in the United States. They have also successfully deregulated many economies that were formerly governed by national or subnational regulations issued by state entities.

One reason that such forces have been able to downsize and privatize the state is that their votaries and representatives do in fact possess political knowledge, and related communicative capacities, in abundance. In the United States, these capacities are observable in the presence of "think tanks" such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute, and the Heritage Foundation, among many others. Libertarian and economically conservative intellectuals populate these and related organizations, and their knowledge of politics and public-policy issues is in fact quite strong.

Thus, the ignorance of the mass public may create opportunities for libertarian forces to undermine state autonomy. In the absence of detailed policy knowledge, such agents can always pose a simple question to the uninformed voter: "Why can't the government program or agency in question be replaced by a private firm or a market mechanism?" The very allure of libertarian metaphors and argument may, I hypothesize, depend upon widespread voter ignorance of particular policy issues and the relative simplicity and conceptual "obviousness" of notions such as "freedom," "competition," "incentives," "cost-benefit analysis," and "the market."

A second example is business or "capital" itself. Richard White's stunning new history of the transcontinental railroads in the Gilded Age demonstrates the capacity of these vast new organizations to fool both "the public" (including many small investors and laborers) and the state (state governments and federal regulators). The ability of railroad managers to conceal fraudulent schemes allowed them to bilk investors out of tens of millions of dollars, all the while escaping the reach and notice of state and national governments (White 2003).

The Issue of Reputation

Public ignorance may constrain potentially autonomous states in other ways. To the extent that general state autonomy rests even partly upon public legitimacy, or to the extent that the autonomy of particular state agencies rests upon their organizational reputations (Carpenter 2001),[4] public ignorance may undermine the ideational basis of a state's autonomy. Put differently, if an autonomous state is to have legitimacy, the public must know *something* about it. To the extent that legitimacy in one or more audiences supports the autonomy of the state, then extreme levels of public ignorance will, at some point, undermine that autonomy.

Again let me offer two examples, the first from research I am now conducting on pharmaceutical regulation. I think it is plausible to say that, for much of the mid- to late-twentieth century, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration behaved as a state organization with relative autonomy from many societal interests. Yet it possessed such autonomy in large measure because of the public's aggregate judgment - a judgment reflected and reverberated in sub-public audiences - that the agency successfully protected American consumers from the hazards of unsafe food and medicines (Carpenter 2006a and 2006b). The FDA's reservoir of public support was founded not upon broad knowledge of its many activities, but upon partial knowledge of a few of them, which buttressed an organizational reputation that, in turn, undergirded a strong array of formal and informal powers. Had American citizens been ignorant of the thalidomide tragedy in Europe, or the role of the FDA in preventing that tragedy in the United States, the FDA would not have benefited from the public's ignorance of most of its activities. But public knowledge of the thalidomide tragedy was widespread, and, for a short time, so was public knowledge of the FDA officer who denied marketing rights to thalidomide in the United States (Carpenter 2006b).

Or consider a quite different setting, drawn from Richard White's magisterial narrative of Indian-European relations in colonial North America (White 1992). Algonquians (a catch-category that included dozens of villages and various "nationalities" in the Great Lakes region) attributed good will to the French and their territorial ruler, Onontio. The power of the French governor was conditional and rested, in part, upon the ignorance of his Algonquian subjects. Yet as White makes clear, the ambit of Onontio's actions also rested to a great degree upon the Algonquians' *knowledge* of Onontio and his representatives. There was an equilibrium, if you will, of understanding and misunderstanding. Upon this equilibrium rested the French governor's autonomy *vis-à-vis* the Algonquians.

Knowledge as More than Unidimensional

Finally, a remark on the rather limited notion of knowledge employed in the pisa theory. In the writings of DeCanio and his colleagues, knowledge is doubly binary. It is a thing either possessed or not (or which an agent has more of or less of), and it attaches, or fails to attach, to aggregate entities in unison. If it fails to attach, we have "public ignorance" (PI), and if this expands the scope of state personnel's decision making, PI leads to state autonomy (SA).

In my understanding of state and organizational reputations, however, there is almost always more than one relevant "audience," and different audiences can understand the same information in different ways and with different effects on state autonomy. For the FDA, the relevant audiences included scientific and professional societies, pharmaceutical manufacturers, burgeoning American consumer movements, and congressional committees. These audiences can entertain radically different interpretations of the same "information": what appears to mass-media organizations as a pattern of FDA "caution" may appear to industry representatives as "bureaucratic delay."

The "multiple audiences" problem is one confronted by numerous organizations and other "performers" (Goffman 1959). A similar dynamic appears in the rule of Cosimo de Medici in fifteenth-century Florence (Padgett and Ansell 1993). Or, again, consider White's narrative. The culture of power and assimilation in French and British colonial North America rested not simply upon asymmetric information but upon certain substantive information that was reflected through the lens of cultural understandings (cf. White 1992, ch. 2). In this narrative, as in so many others, knowledge is less a matter of grasping "more" facts (knowledge) or "fewer" facts (ignorance). It is rather a matter of knowing in different ways; or of using different categories, narratives, and frames to understand those in power - and, thus, either to enhance or impinge upon that power.

* * *

The relationship between societal knowledge and state autonomy is one deserving of further thought and investigation. I look forward to seeing DeCanio and others pursue this line of inquiry further. In doing so, however, I think they must transcend the pisa formula that in democratic political systems, if you have public ignorance, then you have state autonomy. The relationships are far more complicated, and far more interesting. They deserve careful and rigorous empirical and historical elaboration.

Notes

1. In related essays, Ilya Somin, Rogan Kersh, Earl Ravenal, and Steven Sheffrin also advanced arguments that support DeCanio's general case. When I refer to "DeCanio and colleagues," I refer to the group of authors who contributed to the *Critical Review* double issue on state autonomy.

2. Thatcher's expression in her published reminiscences went somewhat differently: "There is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women, and there are families" (Thatcher 1993, 626). Some observers have her statement as "there is no society," and others have it as "there is no public interest." For an example, see Miller 2006.

3. For select studies in this tradition, see Hutchings 2005; Krosnick 1990.

4. A fine critique of this reputation-based perspective was recently launched by Patrick Roberts (2006). Roberts argues that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (fema) enjoyed a very positive reputation among politicians during some of the past two decades, but that its reputation-based autonomy was short-lived. I think Roberts's conception of reputation is too narrow - he observes fema's reputation as embedded in an audience of politicians, whereas I have situated such reputations in audiences of societal networks, including those of professions and the sciences, political groups, businesses and their associations, and consumer groups, among many others (Carpenter 2001, 2006a, and 2006b).

REFERENCES

1. Carpenter, Daniel (2000) State Building through Reputation Building: Policy Innovation and Coalitions of Esteem at the Post Office, 1883-1912.. *Studies in American Political Development* **14**:(2) , pp. 121-155. [crossref]

2. Carpenter, Daniel (2001) *The Forging of Bureaucratic Autonomy: Reputations, Networks and Policy Innovation in Executive Agencies, 1862-1928* Princeton University Press , Princeton

3. Carpenter, Daniel (2006a) Harvard University - Unpublished MS

4. Carpenter, Daniel (2006b) The Continuous Crystallization of an Organizational Reputation: The FDA in Public, Scientific, Congressional and Corporate Audiences, 1962-1990.. Paper presented at the 2007 annual meetings of the Midwest Political Science Association Chicago

5. DeCanio, Samuel (2000a) Beyond Marxist State Theory.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 215-236.

6. DeCanio, Samuel (2000b) Bringing the State Back In ...Again,. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 139-146.

7. Goffmann, Erving (1959) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* Doubleday , Garden City, N.Y.

8. Hutchings, Vincent L. (2005) *Public Opinion and Democratic Accountability: How Citizens Learn about Politics* Princeton University Press , Princeton

9. Kersh, Rogan (2000) State Autonomy and Civil Society: The Lobbyist Connection.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 237-258.

10. Krosnick, Jon A. (1990) Government Policy and Citizen Passion: A Study of Issue Publics in Contemporary America.. *Political Behavior* **21**:(1) , pp. 59-92. [crossref]

11. Lupia, Arthur and McCubbins, Matthew D. (2000) *The Democratic Dilemma: Can Citizens Learn What They Need to Know?* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

12. Miller, Arthur (1995) Let's Privatize Congress.. *The New York Times* - 10 January A19

13. Padgett, John F. and Ansell, Christopher K. (1993) Robust Action and the Rise of Medici, 1400-1434.. *American Journal of Sociology* **98**:(6) , pp. 1259-1319. [crossref]

14. Ravenal, Earl C. (2000) Ignorant Armies: The State, The Public, and the Making of Foreign Policy.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 327-374.

15. Roberts, Patrick S. (2006) fema and the Prospects for Reputation-Based Autonomy.. *Studies in American Political Development* **20**:(Spring) , pp. 57-87.

16. Thatcher, Margaret (1993) *The Downing Street Years* HarperCollins , London

17. White, Richard (1992) *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge

18. White, Richard (2003) Information, Markets and Corruption: Transcontinental Railroads in the Gilded Age.. *Journal of American History* **90**:(1)

Benjamin Ginsberg

Autonomy and Duplicity: Reply to DeCanio

Abstract

While Samuel DeCanio is correct to maintain that the state has considerable autonomy due to the public's vast ignorance of the government's affairs, he neglects to consider that the public's ignorance also stems from the deceptions of the politically powerful, who withhold and distort information in a variety of ways. This can take the form of outright lies; anonymous leaks; press and video releases that don't mention the originating group or its interests; giving reporters access to otherwise inaccessible information, so that they will report favorably on a certain program or event; publicity stunts from groups as far afield as nasa and the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority; or the financing of periodicals that are sympathetic towards one's cause. State autonomy induced by public ignorance may thus be generated by the state itself.

Introduction

Samuel DeCanio (2000a and 2000b) has suggested in an earlier volume of this journal that pervasive public ignorance regarding government and politics contributes substantially to the state's autonomy. This argument seems to have considerable merit. Many surveys indicate that large segments of the public lack even a rudimentary understanding of governmental processes and political issues. And it seems plausible to suggest that such a poor understanding of what the government is doing helps to give officials a freer hand when they make decisions.

Yet explanations of state autonomy focusing upon the public's shortcomings seem, at least implicitly, to place too much weight upon the citizen and not enough upon the actions of public officials, bureaucracies, and other state entities. Much of the public's ignorance is an inevitable result of the lies and deceptions routinely practiced by state actors. From minor bureaucrats to the president of the United States, government officials hide information, disseminate misleading information and, frequently enough, simply lie to the public.

"I have previously stated and I repeat now that the United States plans no military intervention in Cuba," said President John F. Kennedy as he planned military action in Cuba. "As president, it is my duty to the American people to report that renewed hostile actions against United States ships on the high seas in the Gulf of Tonkin have today required me to order the military forces of the United States to take action in reply," said President Lyndon Johnson as he fabricated an incident to justify expansion of American involvement in Vietnam. "We did not, I repeat, did not, trade weapons or anything else [to Iran] for hostages," said President Ronald Reagan in November, 1986, four months before admitting that U.S. arms had been traded to Iran in exchange for Americans being held hostage there. "Simply stated, there is no doubt that Saddam Hussein now

has weapons of mass destruction," said Vice President Dick Cheney before the invasion of Iraq; when it turned out that these weapons did not exist, Assistant Defense Secretary Paul Wolfowitz explained that "for bureaucratic reasons, we settled on one issue, weapons of mass destruction [as justification for invading Iraq], because it was the one reason everyone could agree on" (Cockburn and St. Clair 2003, 1).

Nietzsche (1999, 30) surely was right when he had Zarathustra observe: "Whatever the state speaks is falsehood."

In some instances, official deception is designed mainly to prevent external interference with the state's plans. No one can hinder programs of whose existence they are unaware. More often, though, lies and misinformation are aimed at manipulating public opinion to secure support for the government's various policies and initiatives.

In the nineteenth century, governments feared public opinion but had little ability to influence it. In fact, rulers could hardly assess or analyze shifts in the popular mood. As W. Phillips Davison (1972, 313) has observed, "Rulers looked upon public opinion with something akin to terror." Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century political elites often would have only the vaguest understanding of popular discontent before "the government, the church hierarchy and the aristocracy suddenly saw the roof blown off."

During those premodern days, the two most important tools used by governments to manage opinion were secrecy and censorship. By blocking access to information, governments sought to inhibit the development of hostile ideas. In the United States, secrecy became part of official policy as early as 1792, when President George Washington attempted to block a congressional inquiry into a disastrous military expedition led by General Arthur St. Clair. Washington claimed what later would be named "executive privilege." (Subsequently, citing the importance of secrecy, Washington declined to provide the Congress with information concerning his negotiations with Great Britain.)

Public Relations

All contemporary governments, of course, continue to employ censorship and secrecy to guard against real or imagined dangers and antagonisms. The U.S. government currently classifies as secret more than 20 million pieces of information each year. Nevertheless, during the twentieth century, national policies toward public opinion began to undergo an important change. Using polling, the mass media, and public-relations techniques, modern governments began to manipulate and manage popular opinion. In the modern era, the censor was joined by the PR officer.

In the United States, management of popular opinion became a routine official function during World War I, when the Wilson administration created a censorship board, enacted sedition and espionage legislation, and attempted to suppress groups like the International Workers of the

World (IWW) that voiced opposition to the war effort. At the same time, however, World War I was the first modern "industrial" war requiring a total mobilization of popular effort on the home front for military production. This prodigious productive effort required the government to convince the civilian population to bear the costs and make the sacrifices needed to achieve industrial and agricultural as well as battlefield success.

The instrument developed by the government to build needed popular support was the Committee on Public Information (CPI), chaired by journalist and publicist George Creel. The CPI organized a massive public-relations and news-management program aimed at promoting popular enthusiasm for the war effort. This program included the dissemination of favorable news reports; the publication of patriotic pamphlets, films, photos, cartoons, bulletins and periodicals; and the organization of "war expositions" and speakers' tours. Special labor programs were aimed at maintaining the loyalty and productivity of the work force. Much of the CPI's staff was drawn from the major advertising agencies. According to Creel (1920), the work of the committee "was distinctly in the nature of an advertising campaign. …Our object was to sell the war."

The CPI was a temporary wartime agency, but its work was a harbinger of the permanent expansion of government opinion management that began with the New Deal and has persisted to the present. The enlargement of the scope of governmental activity that began during the Roosevelt era was accompanied by an explosion of official public-relations efforts. Every new department, agency, bureau, office, and committee quickly established a public-relations or public-information arm to persuade the citizenry to cooperate with its efforts and support its objectives.

The link between the expansion of government and the growth of opinion management was put into clear focus by Chester Bowles. Early in his long career in public life, Bowles served as Director of the New Deal's Office of Price Administration (OPA). Under Bowles's leadership, OPA developed an extensive public-information program whose large budget drew Congressional fire. Bowles's defense of the program is recalled in his memoirs:

At one point, Congress threatened to cut our information budget. I testified that if they deprived us of the means of explaining our program to the people, our requirements for investigators and inspectors to enforce our regulations would be greatly increased. With a $5 million annual budget for information, I said I could keep the American people reasonably informed about our regulations and their own obligations and rights as citizens. But, if Congress cut this $5 million, I would have no alternative but to make a request for $15 million to hire law enforcement inspectors to prosecute the many people who, often through their own ignorance and lack of information, had acted illegally. (Bowles 1973, 93)

In other words, manipulation is cheaper than coercion.

The government's interest in "explaining programs to the people" has, of course, increased substantially since the New Deal. Every federal agency now engages in opinion management efforts that dwarf the OPA's $5 million program. The federal government now spends hundreds

of millions each year on advertising, public information, and related matters, and Americans are now constantly exposed to efforts by the government to explain things to them. Government officials and agencies employ a variety of instruments to manipulate information. These include, but are not limited to, publicity stunts, leaks, press releases, and subsidies to the private media.

Publicity Stunts

Publicity stunts are efforts to create or dramatize events designed to illustrate or highlight a particular perspective. Done effectively, a publicity stunt can shape opinions and perspectives without alerting audiences to the fact that they are the targets of manipulation.

One federal agency that has become notorious for staging particularly expensive and dangerous publicity stunts is the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (nasa), the government entity charged with administering America's space program. nasa's culture was formed during the heady days when America raced against the Soviet Union to launch men into space, after President Kennedy had dedicated America to putting a man on the moon. That era reached its climax in 1969, with the Apollo 11 lunar landing. Since then, political leaders have not seen space exploration as a top priority and public interest in space has waned. Working closely with major defense contractors, nasa was able to secure funding for the construction of a small number of space shuttles, but the agency found its budgets constantly under attack and its efforts to promote interest in more ambitious exploratory programs generally thwarted. Indeed, most space scientists have urged nasa to scale back its endeavors, arguing that most of the cost and risk of nasa's programs involves the difficulty of keeping human beings alive in space, while virtually all the scientific payoff could be achieved with much cheaper unmanned flights. For nasa executives, though, manned spaceflight is the agency's *raison d'être*, and issues of cost and scientific value are secondary.

To stimulate support for its ongoing commitment to manned spaceflight, nasa has resorted to publicity stunts, sometimes with disastrous consequences. In 1985, the agency invited America's schoolteachers to compete for a spot in the space shuttle program. Agency executives reasoned that conducting a contest to send a teacher into space would generate enormous interest in the space program, particularly among millions of schoolchildren and their parents. Indeed, on the day that Christa McAuliffe, the winning teacher, was launched into space on the Challenger shuttle, televisions in classrooms throughout the country were tuned to the event. nasa executives were thrilled. Unfortunately, nasa's publicity stunt turned into a major public-relations disaster and human tragedy when the Challenger exploded, killing six astronauts as well as the unfortunate teacher.

Undeterred, nasa has continued to seek ways of dramatizing its manned spaceflight program. In 1998, for example, the agency sent aging Senator John Glenn into orbit on the Discovery space shuttle. Three decades earlier, Glenn had been the first American to orbit the earth, and had continued from his seat in the Senate to serve as a vocal champion of the space program. nasa administrators hoped that sending such a legendary figure back into space would heighten public

interest in manned space flight. Criticized for the nearly $500 million cost of this stunt, nasa bosses countered that the mission had a valid scientific purpose, namely to investigate the effects of space flight on aging. Even if this somewhat fanciful explanation was true, it is not precisely clear why it would be so important to understand the effects of space flight on aging. Perhaps nasa plans to recruit a corps of senior-citizen astronauts or, alternatively, to expand its revenue base by constructing retirement villages on Mars. Nothing seems too bizarre for the fertile imaginations of nasa publicists.

nasa publicity has been sufficiently effective that even after another space shuttle explosion, killing seven astronauts in 2003, most Americans have continued to support the space program. Asked by CBS in 2003 whether the shuttle program should go forward, 75 percent said yes. In the same survey, only 27 percent said too much money was being spent on the space program. Only 11 percent said the space program did not contribute much to science - the answer that would be given by most space scientists.

Leaks

A leak is the disclosure of confidential information to the news media. Leaks may emanate from a variety of sources, including "whistle blowers" - lower-level officials who hope to publicize what they view as their bosses' improper activities. Most leaks, though, originate not with low-level whistle blowers but, rather, with senior government officials, prominent politicians, and political activists. Such personages often cultivate long-term relationships with journalists to whom they regularly leak confidential information, knowing that it is likely to be published on a priority basis in a form acceptable to them. Their confidence is based upon the fact that journalists are likely to regard high-level sources of confidential information as valuable assets whose favor must be retained.

For example, Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Vice President Cheney's former chief of staff, was apparently such a valuable source of leaks to so many prominent journalists that his name was seldom even mentioned in the newspapers, despite his prominence in Washington and his importance as a decision maker (Massing 2005, 36). The more assiduously the recipients of leaked information strive to keep their sources secret, however, the more difficulty other journalists have in checking its validity.

Through such tacit alliance with journalists, prominent figures can manipulate news coverage and secure the publication of stories that serve their purposes. One recent case that revealed the complexities of this culture of leaks was that of Valerie Plame, a CIA analyst who happened to be married to Joseph Wilson, a prominent career diplomat. Wilson had angered the Bush White House by making a number of statements that were critical of the president's policies in Iraq. In an apparent effort to discredit Wilson, one or more administration officials informed prominent journalists that Plame had improperly used her position to help Wilson. In so doing, these officials may have violated a federal statute prohibiting disclosure of the identities of covert

intelligence operatives. The leak in the Plame case came to light only because it was potentially illegal. Thousands of other leaks each year are quietly and seamlessly incorporated into the news.

Press Releases

Also seamlessly incorporated into daily news reports each year are thousands of press releases. The press release, sometimes called a news release, is a story written by an advocate or publicist and distributed to the media in the hope that journalists will publish it with little or no revision and under their own bylines.

The inventor of the press release was a famous New York public-relations consultant named Ivy Lee. In 1906, a train operated by one of Lee's clients - the Pennsylvania Railroad - was involved in a serious wreck. Lee quickly wrote a story about the accident that presented the railroad in a favorable light, and he distributed the account to reporters. Many papers published Lee's slanted story as their own objective account of events, and the railroad's reputation for quality and safety remained intact.

Consistent with Lee's example, today's press release presents facts and perspectives that serve an advocate's interests, but is written in a way that mimics the factual news style of the periodical or news program to which it has been sent. It is quite difficult for the audience to distinguish a well-designed press release from an actual news story. For instance, an April, 2005, article sent to thousands of newspapers by the Associated Press was headlined "Fed Unveils Financial Education Website." Apparently written by an AP reporter, the article discussed the various ways in which a new site developed by the Federal Reserve could help consumers make informed decisions. The article did not mention that it was basically a slight revision of a press release that could be found on the Fed's old Web site (Montopoli 2005). In a similar vein, a June, 2005, *Los Angeles Times* story claimed, without offering an explanation, that the number of homeless people in Los Angeles County had quintupled since the previous year. In presenting this shocking increase in homelessness, though, the article neglected to mention that the data came from a press release issued by the Los Angeles Homeless Service Authority. For the Authority, more homelessness equals more money and staff. Indeed, on its own Web site, the authority indicated that it had undertaken its new count of homeless individuals, in part, to "increase funding for homeless services in our community."[1]

These should not be seen as isolated examples. According to some experts, more than 50 percent of the articles in a newspaper on any given day are based upon press releases. Indeed, more than 75 percent of the journalists responding to a recent survey acknowledged using press releases for their stories (Wilcox and Cameron 2006, 357).

Journalists are certainly aware of the fact that the authors of press releases have their own agendas and are hardly unbiased reporters of the news. Nevertheless, the economics of publishing and broadcasting dictate that large numbers of stories will always be based upon such releases. Newspapers and television stations are businesses and, for many, the financial bottom

line is more important than journalistic integrity (see Merritt 2005). The use of press releases allows a newspaper or broadcast network to present more stories without requiring it to pay more staff or incur the other costs associated with investigating and writing the news. As one newspaper executive has said, the public relations people who generally write news releases are "unpaid reporters" (quoted in Wilcox and Cameron 2006, 357).

In recent years, the simple printed press release has been joined by the "video news release," designed especially for television stations. The video release is a taped report, usually about 90 seconds long (the typical length of a TV news story), designed to look and sound like any other broadcast news segment. In exchange for airing material that serves the interests of some advocate, the television station broadcasting it is relieved of the considerable expense and bother of identifying and filming its own news story. The audience is usually unaware that the "news" it is watching is actually someone's canned publicity footage.

One recent example of a video news release was a pair of 90-second segments funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 2004. After Congress enacted legislation adding a prescription-drug benefit to the Medicare program, HHS sent a video release designed to look like a news report to local TV stations around the country. Forty stations aired the report without indicating that it came from the government. The segment is introduced by the local news anchor, reading from a government-suggested script. The anchor reads, "Reporter Karen Ryan helps sort through the details" of the new Medicare law. Then, against the backdrop of film showing President Bush signing the law and the reactions of apparently grateful senior citizens, an unseen narrator, speaking like a reporter, presents the new law in a positive light. "The new law, say officials, will simply offer people with Medicare more ways to make their health coverage more affordable." The segment concludes with the signoff, "In Washington, I'm Karen Ryan reporting." Viewers are not informed that Karen Ryan is, in fact, an employee of the ad agency hired by the government to create the video release (Fritz, et al. 2004, 252-53). In response to criticism, an HHS spokesperson pointed out that the same sort of video news release had often been used by the Clinton administration and by a number of firms and interest groups. "The use of video news releases is a common, routine practice in government and the private sector," he said. "Anyone who has questions about this practice needs to do some research on modern public information tools" (ibid., 357).

Subsidized Media

From creating phony reporters to read make-believe news stories, it is but a small step to hiring real reporters to present sham accounts. And this step has been taken quite frequently by both the government and private advocates.

A number of cases have come to light in recent years in which the government has paid journalists to write favorable accounts of their activities and efforts. For example, late in 2005, the U.S. military acknowledged that contractors in its employ had regularly paid Iraqi newspapers to carry positive news about American efforts in that nation. The Washington-based

Lincoln Group, a public-relations firm working under contract to the federal government, says it placed more than 1,000 news stories in the Iraqi and Arab press over the past four years (Gerth 2005, 1). Iraqis reading the articles would have had no way to know that the material being presented to them was produced at the behest of the American authorities.

In a similar vein, the U.S. military and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) operate or subsidize radio stations and newspapers in Afghanistan, staffed by local journalists who write or broadcast in local dialects. Every effort is made to maintain the impression that these media outlets are autonomous, Afghan-run organizations with no connection to the United States. One USAID representative explained, "We want to maintain the perception that these [media] are in fact fully independent" (Gerth 2005, 18). Needless to say, the U.S.-controlled media paint a rosy picture of American efforts in Afghanistan. Apparently, there is no bad news in that impoverished and war-torn country. "We have no requirements to adhere to journalistic standards of objectivity," said a U.S. Army spokesperson (ibid.).

The government's practice of hiring journalists is not limited to operations abroad. In recent years, federal agencies have paid several journalists and commentators to report favorably on government initiatives and programs. The Department of Education, for example, paid commentator Armstrong Williams $241,000 to promote President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act. Williams wrote favorably about the law in his newspaper column, commented positively about it during his cable television appearances, and urged other commentators to interview Education Secretary Roderick Paige, but did not disclose his financial relationship with the agency whose programs he was touting (Kurtz 2005, 1). In a similar vein, the Department of Health and Human Services paid syndicated columnist Maggie Gallagher $20,000 to promote the administration's views on marriage. Gallagher wrote several columns on the topic without revealing her financial relationship with the administration.

Perhaps there is nothing new here. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, many newspapers were created by public officials, political parties, and individual politicians to promote their political ideas and ambitions. And before advertising revenues emancipated them, many newspapers depended upon government contracts and party subscriptions for their revenues, allowing politicians to exercise substantial control over newspaper content.

For example, in the early years of the Republic, the *Gazette of the United States*, published by John Fenno, served as the semi-official organ for Alexander Hamilton and his Federalist allies. The *Gazette* praised Hamilton at every opportunity and was, in its turn, the recipient of lucrative government printing contracts.

To counter the influence of Fenno's *Gazette*, Thomas Jefferson undertook to found a rival newspaper. Jefferson secured the services of Philip Freneau, a talented poet and journalist, to establish the *National Gazette*. To help support the new venture, Jefferson gave Freneau a position as translator in the State Department. Needless to say, the new paper excoriated Hamilton while continually praising Jefferson. It ceased publication after two years, but it was soon replaced by several new Jeffersonian papers, including the Philadelphia *Aurora*, edited by Benjamin Franklin's grandson, Benjamin Franklin Bache. Bache's vituperative attacks infuriated

the Federalists. The desire to silence the *Aurora* was one of the factors impelling the Federalists to draft the Alien and Sedition Acts (Starr [2004](), 78).

After Jefferson's election in 1800, the Acts were allowed to lapse. But the Federalists continued to develop newspapers of their own, such as William Cobbett's New York *Evening Post*, to heap scorn on the Jeffersonians (Pasley [2003]()). In the ensuing decades, the Jacksonians established a network of partisan newspapers, as did their partisan foes, the Whigs. The leading Whig editor, Horace Greeley, helped to elect William Henry Harrison in 1840. After the collapse of the Whigs, Greeley's New York *Tribune* became the chief organ of the new Republican party, championing opposition to the expansion of slavery.

Today's American newspapers are not formally linked to politicians or political parties (although this continues to be the pattern in a number of other nations, such as Italy, where Silvio Berlusconi owns or controls several television stations, a news magazine, and two newspapers, which he uses to promote his party's ideas). But despite their nominal independence, many American newspapers have close ties to one or the other political party and generally champion its candidates and ideas. *The New York Times* nearly always supports Democratic programs and initiatives, while the *Washington Times* is closely allied with the Republicans.

Many surveys have indicated that the majority of national print and broadcast journalists identify themselves as Democrats,[2] and for several decades, Republicans have railed against what they see as liberal bias in the mainstream media, including the three broadcast television networks (e.g., Goldberg [2002]()). In response, Republicans have worked to develop a network of newspapers, periodicals, radio programs, and cable-TV outlets that, while not formally affiliated with the party, provide favorable coverage to the GOP's candidates and policy initiatives. Rush Limbaugh, Sean Hannity, and Fox News Channel follow the example set long ago by the Federalists and Jeffersonians.

Of course, the Federalists and Jeffersonians could never have envisioned the latest front in partisan media warfare: the blog. Here, Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals duke it out with little regard for even the appearance of impartiality (Chait [2007]()).

Government Propaganda and State Autonomy

Private advocates employ many of the same techniques used by the government, and bloggers have recently been compared to propagandists in *The New Republic* (Chait [2007](), 25). The government's efforts to shape public opinion, however, are somewhat different in kind and character from the activities of private advocates.

To begin with, the government usually has the capacity to speak with a louder voice than almost any other concern. Important national officials, the president in particular, seldom have any difficulty attracting the attention of the media for their speeches and press conferences. Every government agency, moreover, includes a public information office staffed by a bevy of PR

professionals. The Department of Defense, for example, employs an enormous public-information staff in the Defense Department Press Office and the Armed Forces Information Service. These offices, under the direction of the Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, conduct press briefings, organize talks by military brass, maintain numerous Web sites, disseminate a daily blizzard of press releases, and operate broadcast and film facilities. The individual military services conduct their own public-information efforts along similar lines.

The uniformed services, as well as several other government agencies, also maintain liaison offices in Hollywood where they endeavor to influence the content of feature films. In exchange for access to military facilities, the free use of billions of dollars in military equipment, and the availability of military personnel to serve as extras, the military seeks favorable cinematic treatment and, sometimes, final approval of the script (Suid 2002). One well-known film produced with the cooperation of the U.S. Navy was "Top Gun," starring matinee idol Tom Cruise. The Navy donated the use of a fleet of F-14 jet fighters and their pilots, two aircraft carriers, and access to the Miramar naval air station, charging the film's producers only for jet fuel. "The Navy gave us tremendous cooperation," said the film's director. Whenever a problem developed, "we contacted [the Secretary of the Navy]. He was very supportive" (Lindsey 1986, C15). The result was a popular feature film that portrayed the Navy in a very favorable light. (After reviewing the script, Navy public-information officers did object to the pilots' use of salty language, but after some discussion, the four-letter words were retained in the interest of cinematic realism.)

Other recent feature films in which Hollywood and the military worked together include "Windtalkers," "Pearl Harbor," and "The Sum of All Fears." In the latter film, the producers agreed to change the original screenplay, in which an aircraft carrier was destroyed, after the Navy objected to the depiction of one of its ships as vulnerable (Seelye 2002, 1).

In addition to possessing a louder voice than most private advocates, the government is also better able to manipulate media access to information. In some instances, citing such factors as national security interests or executive privilege, government officials and agencies can legally prevent the dissemination of information that might cause them embarrassment. Thus, early in the Bush presidency, Vice President Cheney invoked executive privilege in refusing to disclose the details of his meetings with energy-industry executives, which may have influenced administration policy. And the U.S. government now holds prisoners in secret facilities around the world, where it is impossible for journalists to obtain information about their status or treatment. Private advocates have considerably more difficulty preventing coverage of a topic, although reporters charge that some important constituencies have occasionally been able to block reportage to which they objected (Fenton 2005, ch. 4).

At the same time, when it believes its interests would be served, the government can provide journalists with access to remote, dangerous, but extremely newsworthy locations that would otherwise be inaccessible. During the 2002 Iraq war, for example, the U.S. military allowed selected reporters to go into battle with the troops. These embedded journalists rode in tanks and armored personnel carriers, enjoying spectacular first-hand access to the combat zone. The Defense Department calculated that journalists who lived with small groups of soldiers, under

conditions of hardship and danger, would be co-opted by the experience and write positive accounts of American forces in action. For the most part, this is precisely what happened.

Finally, the government has an important asset that is not readily available to private advocates. The government generally can rely upon Americans' patriotic sentiments - inculcated through the family, through years of civic education in the schools, and through the media - to promote at least initial acceptance of its claims, particularly when these involve foreign relations or national-security matters. Most Americans feel a sense of pride in their nation and its institutions even when they do not like the particular individuals in office. In a recent national survey, 56 percent of all respondents said they felt very patriotic; 35 percent described themselves as somewhat patriotic; and 89 percent said that, whatever its faults, the United States had the best system of government in the world (Bowman 2005).

This reservoir of patriotism means that the government's allegations will often be given the benefit of the doubt, even when they are not supported by much in the way of evidence and, sometimes, even when they seem patently implausible. In some instances, in fact, those who question the contentions of government officials are castigated for their lack of patriotism. Thus, for example, those who questioned President Bush's avowals in 2002 that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction were often assailed as unpatriotic, with some broadcasters refusing to give air time to groups seeking to dispute the president's claims (Rutherford 2004, ch. 2). Ultimately, of course, popular patriotism does not offer the government full immunity against having its deceptions unmasked. But much can happen before reality overcomes patriotism and Americans see through their government's propaganda. Iraq, as is now generally acknowledged, turned out not to possess weapons of mass destruction. And yet, nearly six bloody years later, American forces continue to do battle in that unfortunate land. In this as in so many other instances, the state was able to play upon its citizens' affection to preserve its autonomy from them.

DeCanio is certainly correct to observe that widespread public ignorance contributes to the state's autonomy. Most citizens know very little about national politics and policies and, on most issues, have no views that decision makers need to take into account. Yet the public's ignorance should not be viewed as a natural phenomenon. The public might know more and be better able to play a role in the political process if politicians, bureaucrats, and elected officials did not habitually hide the truth from them. This, public ignorance should be seen as partly the result of an official strategy designed specifically to preserve state autonomy.

Notes

1. *Independent Sources*, 4 January 2006.

2. See, for example, Scarborough 1996, 1. Similarly, a 2004 Pew poll found that only 7 percent of America's journalists consider themselves conservatives. By contrast, 33 percent of the general public calls itself conservative.

REFERENCES

1. Bowles, Chester (1973) *Promises to Keep* Harper , New York

2. Bowman, Karlyn (2005)

3. Chait, Jonathan (2007) The Left's New Machine: How the Netroots Became the Most Important Mass Movement in U.S. Politics.. *The New Republic*

4. (Cockburn, Alexander and St. Clair, Jeffrey eds.) (2003) Weapons of Mass Destruction: Who Said What When.. *Counterpunch*

5. Creel, George (1920) *How We Advertised America* Harper , New York

6. DeCanio, Samuel (2000a) Beyond Marxist State Theory: State Autonomy in Democratic Societies.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 215-236.

7. DeCanio, Samuel (2000b) Bringing the State Back In …Again.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 139-146.

8. Davison, W. (1972) Public Opinion Research as Communication.. *Public Opinion Quarterly*

9. Fenton, Tom (2005) *Bad News* HarperCollins , New York

10. Fritz, Ben, Keefer, Bryan and Nyhan, Brendan (2004) *All the President's Spin* Touchstone , New York

11. Gerth, Jeff (2005) Military's Information War Is Vast and Often Secretive.. *The New York Times*

12. Goldberg, Bernard (2002) *Bias* Harper , New York

13. Kurtz, Howard (2005) Administration Paid Commentator.. *The Washington Post*

14. Lindsey, Robert (1986) Top Gun: Ingenious Dogfights.. *The New York Times* [pubmed]

15. Massing, Michael (2005) The Press: The Enemy Within.. *New York Review of Books*

16. Merritt, Davis (2005) *Knightfall: Knight Ridder and How the Erosion of Newspaper Journalism Is Putting Democracy at Risk* Amacom , New York

17. Montopoli, Brian (2005) Press Release Journalism.. *Columbia Journalism Review Daily*

18. Nietzsche, Friedrich (1999) *Thus Spake Zarathustra* Dover , Mineola, N.Y.

19. Pasley, Jeffrey (2003) *The Tyranny of Printers: Newspaper Politics in the Early American Republic* University Press of Virginia , Charlottesville

20. Rutherford, Paul (2004) *Weapons of Mass Persuasion: Marketing the War Against Iraq* University of Toronto Press , Toronto

21. Scarborough, Rowan (1996) Leftist Press? Reporters Working in Washington Acknowledge Liberal Leanings in Poll.. *Washington Times*

22. Seelye, Katherine (2002) When Hollywood's Big Guns Come Right from the Source.. *The New York Times*

23. Starr, Paul (2004) *The Creation of the Media* Basic Books , New York

24. Suid, Lawrence (2002) *Guts and Glory* University Press of Kentucky , Louisville

25. Wilcox, Dennis and Cameron, Glen T. (2006) *Public Relations: Strategy and Tactics* 8th ed, Pearson , Boston

Martin Shefter

State Autonomy and Popular Participation

Abstract

The argument that the modern democratic state is fairly autonomous, because mass publics have limited knowledge of government and limited interest in politics, ignores the full range of possibilities. The character of a nation's parties and other political institutions greatly affects the extent of political participation among even citizens who are well informed and concerned about public affairs. And under appropriate conditions, the mobilization and enthusiastic engagement of the public will actually increase state power.

Introduction

At first glance, it appears to be true, almost by definition, that state autonomy varies inversely with popular political participation. If members of the general public care little about government, and popular political participation is limited, rulers can ignore the views of people outside the ruling circle, and the state will enjoy considerable autonomy.

But when ordinary people develop firm views about how public officials should behave, and seek to get officials to act accordingly, rulers no longer enjoy such leeway. That is, high levels of mass political engagement and popular political participation limit the autonomy of the state. The contributors to *Critical Review*'s special issue on state autonomy challenge this proposition.

A central theme of the issue is summarized in the abstract of Samuel DeCanio's (2000, 139) introductory article, "Bringing the State Back In ...Again":

Public opinion research documenting the ignorance of mass politics suggests that modern states may be as autonomous as, or more autonomous than, premodern states. ...Modern states have less recourse to overt coercion because the very thing that legitimates them in the eyes of society - democracy - virtually ensures that society will not control the state, since the putative agent of control, the electorate, cannot possibly be well informed about the multitudinous tasks undertaken by modern governments.

It is commonly thought that in democratic regimes, public officials must pay heed to popular demands, lest voters drive them from power. But DeCanio suggests that in the United States and other advanced societies, public officials rarely face such challenges, because most members of the public in these democracies are politically disengaged - as Philip Converse and his colleagues argued a generation ago. With the great mass of citizens neither knowing much nor caring deeply about public affairs, the ability of top officials to run the government is rarely challenged by

political outsiders. Thus, the modern state has considerable autonomy because of the public's political ignorance.

There are, however, a number of problems with this understanding of the relationship between mass political activity and state autonomy.

First, it presupposes that the impulse for mass participation in politics comes largely from below, and hence that there is an inverse relationship between the extent of popular participation and the autonomy of the state. Similarly, it attributes mass political inactivity to the general public's low levels of knowledge and concern about government and politics. But these suppositions fail to pay sufficient attention to Mancur Olson's analysis of collective action. Olson argues that even if the members of a group are firmly convinced that their interests would be served by some collective activity, they will have little incentive to bear the costs of participation if the benefit that a group member receives from a successful effort to obtain a political aim does not require that individual's own small contribution to the collective endeavor. Thus, the level of popular participation in a political system is crucially influenced not simply by the level of popular concern about politics, but also by the regime's institutions, which may encourage or discourage participation in government and politics.

Another problem with DeCanio's understanding of popular political participation is his assumption that mass participation is initiated at the behest of political outsiders, and is grudgingly conceded by rulers so as to avoid arousing popular discontent. This image fails to recognize that in seeking to advance their own purposes, elites often find it useful to encourage the political mobilization and incorporation of outsiders. Most obviously, if the elites in a regime are sharply divided over a major issue, they may appeal for the support of political outsiders who share their views on that question. That is, elites will encourage the participation of segments of the mass public that formerly may have been legally excluded or politically quiescent, if this mobilization can be expected to tip the balance in favor of the mobilizing elites.

For example, following the U.S. Civil War, a major element of the nation's political leadership - the Radical faction of the Republican party - sought to completely remake the social and economic systems of the former Confederate states. The Radical Republicans promoted the enfranchisement of the freedmen because they anticipated that former slaves would support the Radical cause. Thus, the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution, enfranchising all citizens regardless of race, was sponsored by a major segment of the nation's political leadership, rather than being imposed by political outsiders (that is, the former slaves) upon a uniformly resistant national elite.

In addition to the presence of elite divisions, another condition under which incumbent leaders may seek to bring outsiders into politics is when elites hope to strengthen the regime they lead. Probably the best-known example occurred during the French Revolution, which won broad support among the population of France by granting citizenship and the right to vote to the great mass of ordinary Frenchmen. The revolutionaries were then able to defend their regime against its foreign opponents by instituting a *levée en masse* - that is, mass conscription. By bringing former political outsiders into the very heart of the regime - its armed forces - the Revolutionary

government was able to field an enormous army of enthusiastic troops that extended the Revolution over much of the European Continent. To increase their own military power, regimes throughout Europe followed the French precedent by expanding suffrage and enacting mass conscription. In this way, universal suffrage became common in the Western world.

The story was broadly similar in the United States. As Theda Skocpol et al. (2002) note, many of the largest membership associations in American history - organizations that came to play a major role in U.S. politics during the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries - were founded during or immediately after the nation's major wars. Public officials and elites encouraged the organization and expansion of America's largest membership associations, because the organizations helped recruit soldiers, sell war bonds, maintain the health and morale of troops in the field, and reintegrate military personnel into American society after their wartime service. To a considerable degree, these organizations - the American Red Cross, the PTA, the "Y," the Boy Scouts, the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Elks, the General Federation of Women's Clubs - created modern American society. By channeling the resources, social contacts, and enthusiasm generated by these membership associations into wartime endeavors, the U.S. government was able to draw on enormous energies for its military efforts.

Political elites in the United States have undertaken to strengthen the nation and its government by extending its base in a number of other ways. Alongside "citizen soldiers," state-builders in nineteenth-century America summoned "citizen taxpayers" and "citizen administrators" (Crenson and Ginsberg 2002, ch. 2). For example, to finance the Civil War, the U.S. government raised and spent an average of $1 billion a year from July 1861 to June 1865. (Total federal expenditures in the fiscal year immediately preceding the war had amounted to a mere $67 million.) President Lincoln and the Republican majority in Congress raised these enormous sums by enacting the nation's first income tax; imposing tariffs on many imported products; levying excise taxes on some products (including alcoholic beverages) that were produced domestically; selling billions of dollars in U.S. bonds to individuals and financial institutions; and issuing a fiat currency, the Greenbacks. Americans demonstrated loyalty to the Union cause by bearing these imposts, purchasing U.S. bonds, and using Greenbacks in their commercial transactions. This popular support enabled the Lincoln administration and the U.S. government to field, provision, and arm the largest and most lethal military force in the Western world between the Napoleonic wars and World War I.

Nineteenth-century U.S. leaders encouraged the active participation of the nation's citizens not only to fight and finance the Civil War, but, more generally, to govern a nation of continental scale. As Matthew Crenson and Benjamin Ginsberg (2002, 23) note, even a half-century after the ratification of the Constitution,

Alexis de Tocqueville reported that he found nothing in America that a European would regard as government. There was no professional civil service …and scarcely any standing army. The country's territory extended to remote regions in which the only government was what the citizens provided themselves. …American government was more democratic than other states at the time because it was exceptionally dependent on the good will, cooperation, and work of its people.

But in the twentieth century, the local, state, and national governments of the United States developed a capacity to govern that did not depend so heavily on widespread participation by members of the general public. These governments developed methods of enforcing the law, maintaining public order, raising public revenues, conscripting soldiers, recruiting public employees, and administering official business that did not require much in the way of mass cooperation. For example, through most of the nineteenth century, the patronage system was the primary method used to recruit and promote public employees. That is, public employees were hired, rewarded, and disciplined on the basis of their political activities, not based on how well they performed their official duties. The patronage system limited the extent to which public supervisors were able to control the behavior of their nominal subordinates. But the civil-service examinations and techniques of "public personnel administration" that came to prevail in the twentieth century gave the leaders of public agencies greater control over government operations than the more participatory patronage system that they replaced.

Now, I am *not* arguing that during the century immediately following the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, the national government never made use of what Max Weber termed "imperative coordination." Nor would I claim that since the turn of the twentieth century, local, state, and national governments in the United States have been able to maintain law and order, raise public revenues, and fight major wars without paying heed to popular sentiment. I am, however, arguing that popular participation is one of the means that political elites use to exercise control over civil society, and that over the past two centuries changes have occurred in the balance between such participatory means of exercising control and more authoritarian methods.

Elites and the institutions they establish play a major role in shaping the extent of popular participation in politics and government, even in democratic regimes. Thus, the level of public interest and participation in democracies does not necessarily indicate the extent of state autonomy.

REFERENCES

1. Crenson, Matthew and Ginsberg, Benjamin (2002) *Downsizing Democracy: How America Sidelined Its Citizens and Privatized Its Public* Johns Hopkins University Press , Baltimore

2. DeCanio, Samuel (2000) Bringing the State Back In ...Again.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2-3) , pp. 139-146.

3. Skocpol, Theda, Munson, Ziad, Karch, Andrew and Camp, Bayliss (Katznelson, Ira and Shefter, Martin eds.) (2002) Patriotic Partnerships: Why Great Wars Nourished American Civic Voluntarism.. *Shaped by War and Trade: International Influences on American Political Development* Princeton University Press , Princeton

Samuel DeCanio

The Autonomy of the Democratic State: Rejoinder to Carpenter, Ginsberg, and Shefter

Abstract

While democratic states may manipulate public opinion and mobilize society to serve their interests, a focus on such active efforts may distract us from the passive, default condition of ignorance-based state autonomy. The electorate's ignorance ensures that most of what modern states do is unknown to "society," and thus need not even acquire social approval, whether manipulated or spontaneous. Similarly, suggestions that democratic states may be "captured" by societal groups must take cognizance of the factors that enable elites to serve the interests of specific societal groups at the expense of the larger society. Bringing studies of voter ignorance into the analysis of state's autonomy from society provides a novel approach to the study of democratic states' autonomy, while also serving to explain how societal "capture" of state policies is possible.

Introduction

It is a pleasure to respond to the comments of Daniel Carpenter, Benjamin Ginsberg, and Martin Shefter. In this Rejoinder I hope not only to offer my responses to their criticisms and observations, but to outline several fruitful avenues of research that have emerged since the publication of the issue of *Critical Review* (vol. 14, nos. 2-3) that first examined the effects of voter ignorance on state autonomy.

The principal argument presented in that volume was that theories of democracy and of state autonomy alike have overlooked one thing: high levels of voter ignorance may be crucial to the autonomy of democratic states (see DeCanio 2000a and 2000b). While electoral demands and public opinion are often thought to ensure that democratic states remain responsive to societal demands, the fact that the overwhelming majority of the public is never even aware of what modern states are doing establishes a prima facie case that, despite their nominal subordination to the will of the people, modern states enjoy considerable autonomy from the societies they govern.

This argument shifts our attention away from the *institutional* variables traditionally used to explain state autonomy (access to revenue, standing armies, loyal bureaucracies), instead suggesting that a single *cultural* variable, the public's political knowledge (or lack thereof), may be central to explaining the autonomy of democratic states. This argument can have dramatic consequences for normative conceptions of democratic governance. At the same time, historians and historically oriented political scientists are generally as unaware of the empirical scholarship documenting voter ignorance as normative political theorists are. If historical scholarship begins

to take cognizance of voter ignorance, it may lead to genuinely new interpretations of critical periods in American political and institutional history.

For instance, Shefter reminds us that historically, state autonomy was sometimes enhanced by government officials' mobilization of popular support for wartime efforts, and by strategically broadening the franchise. I don't disagree. But the 1980s campaign among political scientists to "bring the [autonomous] state back in" to our understanding of modern politics failed, in my opinion, because it could not go beyond highlighting such direct state efforts to gain public compliance as those noted by Shefter. This preoccupation with the overt efforts of governments may be quite useful for understanding how premodern states extracted resources from their populations (a central focus for state theorists in the 1980s). However, such a blunt understanding of the sources of state autonomy can be imported into *democratic* contexts (at least when the size of the electorate is relatively fixed) only by pointing up historical episodes of state attempts to *manipulate* the public, upon which Ginsberg also focuses.

State manipulation of the public is not inconsistent with public ignorance - which, indeed, is the very basis of the public's manipulability. But I think it is more important to note that *effective* instances of manipulation are rare in modern democracies, relative to the vast scope of the things that democratic governments do. This means either that modern states must be much *less* autonomous than they used to be, or that the sources of the modern states' autonomy are more subtle and overlooked than they used to be: state officials' autonomy may not be based upon their ability to directly manipulate the public, but may instead arise from the simple fact that the public has little idea what bureaucrats, judges, and legislators are doing. If the public is unaware of the state's actions, there is no need to manipulate public opinion.

Public-Ignorance Based State Autonomy

To date, the most extensive statement of the Public Ignorance/State Autonomy (pisa, as Carpenter calls it) perspective remains the issue of *Critical Review* that is the subject of this exchange (but see DeCanio 2005).[1] In retrospect it is clear that the argument was initially presented in a way that appears one-dimensional, raising some of the questions now posed by Carpenter, Ginsberg, and Shefter. All three respondents maintain that a straightforward pisa model, in which public ignorance is the sole determinant of modern states' autonomy, oversimplifies a more complicated reality, and may actually mischaracterize how voter ignorance interacts with and influences the degree of state autonomy. I agree.

But before getting into the details of Carpenter's paper in particular, let me register the fact that none of the respondents denies the importance of public ignorance in generating state autonomy. For the most part, our disagreements are over the relative weight to assign public ignorance, as opposed to more conventionally recognized determinants of autonomy.

Carpenter notes that as it was originally presented, the pisa argument appears to ignore the fact that societal interest groups may use voters' ignorance of their actions to pursue strategies that

make the state a means to their ends. (He also suggests that instead of empowering the state, public ignorance may serve to undermine the legitimacy necessary for a state's continued operation.) Ginsberg discusses how public ignorance may be exacerbated by government officials who deliberately mislead the public by hiding, or simply misrepresenting, political information. Shefter points out that political elites may themselves mobilize social groups to participate in ways that may enhance state power, such that even popular involvement in democratic politics is no guarantee that society will control the modern state.

All of these claims amount to saying that simple public ignorance is not the only basis for democratic state autonomy. While I believe that this is true, and was not adequately explicated in the original presentation of the argument, it is also the case that these points are compatible with or even extensions of the pisa framework more than they are criticisms of it. The additional sources of state autonomy to which my interlocutors point all *derive from* mass political ignorance. State and state-influencing social elites would presumably be as incapable of hiding their activities as of manipulating the public if the latter were fully informed about what the state was doing.

Public ignorance was originally presented as an independent variable directly responsible for causing all state autonomy in democratic societies. This was misleading. Voter ignorance is better seen as a conditioning, or underlying, variable that is responsible for much of the autonomy of modern democratic governments - but one that may operate through many channels, and one that is also influenced by other variables.

Public ignorance might be compared to the condition of anarchy structuring international affairs. Although anarchy can be modulated by alliances, the actions of states in international affairs are incomprehensible unless we recognize how anarchy conditions interstate conflict and alliance formation. Similarly, public officials, media elites, and interest groups can take advantage of public ignorance to deliver partial or biased information to segments of an ignorant public or to the entire electorate, sometimes enhancing and sometimes constraining state autonomy. But the extent and nature of democratic states' responsiveness or immunity to "societal demands" will usually be incomprehensible if we overlook the ignorance of the *demos* that is supposed to be in charge, and the normal situation of state autonomy to which this background condition leads.

Public Ignorance and Regulatory Capture

Carpenter appears to grant this point at the outset, when he suggests that the majority of voters do not influence most state regulatory operations because they are unaware of them. In the presence of such popular "non-attitudes," state elites enjoy de facto autonomy from *most* voters.

However, Carpenter argues that public ignorance does not *always* generate state autonomy, because societal interest groups may be able to use public ignorance to advance their interests at the general public's expense, by influencing state officials.

There appear to be two principal mechanisms through which interest groups could directly influence *elected* state officials. First, they could use economic resources, such as campaign contributions, to pressure elected officials into doing what they want. However, research examining the influence of campaign contributions finds this posited relationship to be tenuous at best (Smith 1999). Second, as Carpenter suggests, interest groups can mobilize issue publics by using their own lines of communication. In principle, this point is valid, for surely a key source of interest groups' influence may be their position as information conduits, ringing "fire alarms" to inform segments of the uninformed public when elected officials - or unelected bureaucrats - are doing something these voters don't like. Voter response to such fire alarms can constrain state autonomy.

While the degree to which the state is subject to capture by organized interests, or subjected to influence by issue publics, will vary according to the situation, I believe that the general pisa claim remains pertinent; for *most* voters, *most* political decisions remain "out of sight and out of mind." This applies to most legislative decisions, most judicial decisions, and most of the state's bureaucratic operations, including the vast body of administrative law. Even the existence of most bureaucracies and administrative courts is unknown to the mass public; *a fortiori* the content of their decisions.

While regulatory capture is typically explained as a collective-action problem, where voters rationally calculate that the dispersed, minuscule benefits that would flow to them if they could resist regulatory capture aren't worth the price of resisting it, this costs paradigm of special-interest influence assumes that voters are *knowledgeable* - so much so that they are aware of the costs imposed on them by the "captured" agency. A very different view emerges if we recognize that most voters don't even know that the agencies in question exist, let alone what policies they are enacting, let alone the costs of those policies. From this perspective, regulatory "capture" may be a function, not of suboptimal incentives, but of the difficulty in knowing about the decisions made by hundreds of regulatory agencies; and the near impossibility of perceiving the indirect effects generated by these innumerable policies - and, therefore, the near impossibility of knowing whether the costs of trying to resist capture really do outweigh the benefits.

In the vacuum of public inattention, interest groups may then capture regulators by offering financial inducements or substantive arguments that would be unpopular to the mass electorate, but that persuade the decision makers. Alternatively, regulated interests may implicitly threaten to draw publicity to proposed regulations in ways that would be harmful to the agency or legislative actor - for example, by framing environmental regulations as destroying specific industries. The upshot is a very different form of subservience to "society" than is contemplated by attempts at realistic understandings of capture and corruption, let alone benignly pluralist views of interest groups (Dahl 1956). Capture and corruption are unlikely to be discovered by a vigilant public, but surely not because of the public's calculation that vigilance does not meet a cost-benefit test. And with the public's ignorance as the background condition to capture and corruption, there is no reason to expect that, even in a "polyarchal" manner, the interests of the public will be "represented" in the process. Indeed, there is no reason to restrict the possibility of capture to societal interest groups at all. Regulators whose actions are unknown to the public

may use their discretion to pursue their own conceptions of the *public* good - however inaccurate their conceptions might be.

(Mis)informing the Ignorant Public

Carpenter notes that the pisa framework is essentially a binary view of societal and state power, and he suggests that in reality, a complex interplay between well-organized social groups and issue publics marks ongoing efforts to influence the policy outputs of modern democratic states. Carpenter urges that more attention be devoted to documenting the impact of these efforts on the general public's awareness of what the state is doing, and of the legitimating effects (justified or not) that such awareness has upon state regulatory actions.

This criticism is well founded, and in recent historical work I have tried to illustrate how the interplay between knowledge disseminated by cultural elites and popular awareness of such knowledge has influenced state autonomy (DeCanio 2005). However, while the public can be made aware of heavily publicized aspects of what democratic states are doing - engaging in a war, for instance, or regulating pharmaceuticals - the public's ignorance of the details of even these high-profile state activities empowers cultural elites to disseminate and frame the information that winds up influencing, and perhaps even creating, public opinion about these matters.

I hesitate to revert to the "state manipulation of the public" paradigm to describe these framing efforts, as Ginsberg and Shefter do, because even when the agenda-setting and framing that shapes mass opinion is performed by public officials, their efforts, while undoubtedly influential, involve only a small fraction of the actions of modern governments.

The fundamental problem with traditional state theory is reconciling state autonomy *from society* with the fact that in democracies - unlike such premodern regimes as revolutionary France, Russia, and China (Skocpol 1979) - society at least nominally controls the state. One way to square this circle is to envision the state as actually being *in charge* of society, not just in the sense that the state is the ultimate arbiter in a geographic region, or that it is the monopolist of authoritative coercion, but in the sense that its personnel are able to use their power as they wish because they *control* public opinion.

Under this depiction of state autonomy, the state itself may frame and disseminate information in ways that generate intense popular reactions that then legitimate and support the decisions already made by the state. For example, by creating the impression that there was a direct link between Saddam Hussein and the September 11 terror attacks, George Bush and Richard Cheney are said to have manufactured popular demands that supported the decision to invade Iraq - demands that would not have existed in the absence of their manipulation of public opinion. This sort of thing, I believe, is what Ginsberg and Shefter are suggesting.

Conversely, Carpenter's alternative is to *minimize* state autonomy by emphasizing instances in which elements of society are in charge of the state. However, this approach must equate those elements - special-interest and "public-interest" groups - with society *as a whole*, as in pluralist theory, if it is to rescue either the legitimacy or the practice of "democracy" from state autonomy.

The pisa alternative is to acknowledge state independence of society without treating democracy as a manipulated sham. It does so by bringing public opinion back in - but with more recognition of the public-ignorance literature than my critics seem to acknowledge.

Mass public opinion can and does influence elected officials in democratic societies. This can diminish democratic states' autonomy in the instances when the public is mobilized. However, even on the issues that do come to public attention, an ignorant public has to be "informed" by elites who frame certain issues as important, and who depict policy alternatives in certain ways, and these elites are rarely governmental, as opposed to mass media, personnel. Moreover, the number of such instances is small relative to the number of policies the state pursues. This is ensured by both the huge quantity of decisions that is made by modern states, and by the fact that the public is so politically ignorant that it takes sustained campaigns by hostile media to get through to the public about any one line of policy decisions. Thus, for example, it has taken several years for the media to pound home the message that there were no WMD in Iraq and no Iraqi ties to Al Qaeda - and that President Bush may even have "lied" about this.

Making a Public Impression

In politics it is often difficult to find cases where tangible consequences are clearly attributable to specific policy decisions. As Walter Lippman (1922) noted long ago, in the overwhelming majority of instances, public decisions produce outcomes that are not directly perceptible; and the theories responsible for those decisions concern causal forces that *cannot* be directly perceived (Friedman 2005). This gives tremendous power to those who "mediate" information to the public, in those rare cases in which public opinion is actually decisive.

If ever there were a clear counterexample to the general "invisibility" of public affairs to an ignorant public, it would seem to be the FDA's ban on thalidomide, adduced by Carpenter. Yet even in this case, it appears that the public's awareness of the issue was mediated by the media. As Carpenter (2007, 11) has written elsewhere, when the FDA was reviewing thalidomide's safety, "American readers were little if at all exposed to the news that thousands of previously rare birth deformities were being observed in Europe and Australia" due to thalidomide. Thus, as the FDA proceeded to refuse to allow thalidomide to enter the U.S. market,

this dearth of public knowledge …meant that there was *essentially no public knowledge* of Frances Kelsey's quiet regulatory triumph. No one asked or documented why the drug had been kept from official approval in the United States. Indeed, American citizens assumed that the drug had never made its way onto U.S. soil. (Ibid., emph. added)

Public awareness began to dawn only after an editorial appeared in the *Washington Post* congratulating the FDA for refusing to approve thalidomide. The editorial was published because Tennessee Senator Estes Kefauver had concluded that he needed "a carefully timed leak designed to influence the passage of impending legislation" that he was sponsoring (Carpenter 2007, 14) - making this a mixed case, since here, as in Ginsberg's model, a state official manipulated public opinion. That manipulation was successful, however, only because after Kefauver leaked the information, the mass media produced "an avalanche of publicity about both thalidomide and about Kelsey," the FDA bureaucrat who had blocked thalidomide from entering the market in the United States.

The larger point suggested by Carpenter's thalidomide example, however, is that heavy publicity can penetrate public consciousness - whether public opinion then becomes supportive of, or a constraint upon, state autonomy. In the latter case - if an official contemplates a decision that, unlike the thalidomide ban, he thinks might be unpopular - the constraining role played by fear of public exposure is likely to be large if the official thinks that the media might play up the story, and small if the decision maker is confident that the decision will not attract hostile media attention. By the same token, I have no quarrel with Carpenter's point that media attention to state actions may even bolster state autonomy, if the attention is favorable.

Most regulatory agencies' decisions, however, are not well publicized, either positively or negatively, and their effects are not easily discerned in the absence of publicity. Studying bureaucracies' reputations among the general public may be less than useful when agencies are virtually unknown in the first place. In 1979, just as Carpenter suggests that the FDA was cementing its reputation among the mass public, a mere 20 percent of Americans knew what the FDA was (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 71). There would seem to be potential for even higher degrees of autonomy among the multitude of more obscure agencies that nonetheless enjoy considerable power.

Just as I do not quarrel with any of my interlocutors, then, about the possibility of other influences on state autonomy, it does not seem to me that, pending further research into the relative magnitude of such variables in a given time and place, the background condition of public unawareness is likely to ensure that, *ceteris paribus*, the larger the scope of government activity, the more the discretion available to those who exercise state power.

REFERENCES

1. Carpenter, Daniel (2007) - Unpublished manuscript

2. Carpenter, Daniel (2007) The Leaning Tower of ": State Autonomy and Public Ignorance.. *Critical Review* **19**:(1) , pp. 157-164. [informaworld]

3. Dahl, Robert A. (1956) *A Preface to Democratic Theory* University of Chicago Press , Chicago

4. DeCanio, Samuel (2000a) Beyond Marxist State Theory: State Autonomy in Democratic Societies.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2) , pp. 215-236.

5. DeCanio, Samuel (2000b) Bringing the State Back In ...Again.. *Critical Review* **14**:(2) , pp. 139-146.

6. DeCanio, Samuel (2005) State Autonomy and American Political Development: How Mass Democracy Promoted State Power.. *Studies in American Political Development* **19**:(2) , pp. 117-136. [crossref]

7. Carpini, Michael X. Delli and Keeter, Scott (1996) *What Americans Know About Politics and Why It Matters* Yale University Press , New Haven

8. Friedman, Jeffrey (2005) "Popper, Weber, and Hayek: The Epistemology and Politics of Ignorance. *Critical Review* **17**:(1-2) , p. ilviii.

9. Lippmann, Walter (1922) *Public Opinion* The Free Press , New York

10. Skocpol, Theda (1979) *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* Cambridge University Press , Cambridge