

The Oxford Handbook of American Public Opinion and the Media

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The Democratic Paradox

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter identifies the problems associated with the American democracy, particularly those related to the government's political leaders and other elites. It takes a look at the factors which drive the policy goals of the political elites, and notes that most of the new online media and traditional press have focused on strategically manipulating the political elites. The chapter also highlights the possible solutions for the American democracy, such as reform.

American democracy, political elites, policy goals, online media, traditional press, strategic manipulation, reform

Introduction

In 1960 E. E. Schattschneider published *The Semi-Sovereign People*, one of the enduring studies of how the opportunities in the United States for citizen direction of government were often diminished by the dominance of interest groups. Schattschneider's conclusion that American politics typically limits the form and degree of democratic influence may appear too pessimistic. Indeed, this volume has demonstrated the substantial and growing attention to public opinion, as reflected in the astronomical expansion of polling since the publication of *The Semi-Sovereign People*. It has also described the vast and growing diversity of information available today. Although these developments have created the potential for expanding American democracy, their actual effects have exacerbated the pathologies of

American politics that have contributed to further constricting popular sovereignty.

The Strains on American Democracy

Celebrating Democratic Responsiveness

A substantial body of quantitative and qualitative research has challenged Schattschneider's dour portrayal of American democracy by reporting evidence to support a more optimistic account of American democracy—the responsiveness of government policy to public opinion (see the reviews by Burstein 2003; Glynn et al. 2004, ch. 9; Wlezien and Soroka 2007). Concluding a review of this research, James Stimson noted that “quasiexperimental studies find clear evidence of responsiveness as do time series analysis of either policy domains or global attitudes and policy” (2007, 861). Methodologically diverse research over the past several decades has reported that the electoral process holds officeholders accountable by removing those who are unresponsive or motivating elected representatives to anticipate future electoral removal by responding to the “median voter” and therefore moving toward the midpoint of public opinion (for example, Downs 1957; Pitkin 1969; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002).

A more recent and commonly cited explanation for government responsiveness is the proliferation of public opinion polling and its availability to political leaders and everyday Americans (Geer 1996; Frankovic, Panagopoulos, and Shapiro 2009). The number of polls has sharply increased during the last third of the twentieth century and is now readily accessible in the media and through online sites such as Polling Report, Pollster, and Real Clear Politics. While presidents were initially able to monopolize polling data for their own use and capitalize on them as a strategic tool, public opinion data are now widely available in accessible formats to everyday citizens and to political leaders in Congress (Jacobs 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Eisinger 2003).

The proliferation of highly visible and easily accessible polling results may help to explain the “congruence” or “consistency” between majority opinion and policy, or between changes in opinion and changes in policies (for example, Monroe 1998; B. I. Page and Shapiro 1983). Although some rational choice models of political decision-making stress that limited information about voters induces risk aversion, the reality is that candidates and government officials have access to and confidence in extensive research

on public opinion in order to respond to the median voter in reaching policy decisions and designing their election campaigns, if they choose (Druckman and Jacobs 2006).

As polling and reports of poll results have become increasingly visible to the public at large, the positions of elected officials and candidates have faced scrutiny when they departed from public opinion. In the case of salient decisions by government officials—such as the passage of health reform in 2010 or the House impeachment of Bill Clinton in 1998—their divergence from public preferences has become a focal point of debate, with the media and citizens raising questions about democratic accountability and politicians, on occasion, offering justifications for their positions. Although cases of public debates about departures from democratic accountability are uncommon, critical “publicity” may illustrate expanded public monitoring of government and greater government responsiveness to public opinion.

In short, American politics—as Paul Quirk and Joseph Hinchliffe (1998) forcefully claim—may now be enveloped by the “hegemony of public opinion.” The institutional mechanism of elections and the availability of ample, trusted, and readily accessible polling data through the media and online sources may enable politicians to respond to public opinion and equip Americans to punish those who do not.

The Paradox of American Democracy

Many of the chapters in this volume and related research point us to a sober and quite different conclusion: Schattschneider's pessimism has stronger—rather than weaker—justification today than it did in 1960. Although the institutional mechanisms of elections and an increasingly pluralistic information environment do create opportunities for democratic policymaking, government responsiveness to public opinion is conditional, selective, and no more frequent and quite possibly less frequent than before the 1980s. Indeed, what would seem to be new opportunities for democracy (the proliferation of information and polling) have, paradoxically, introduced new or newly intensified obstacles to popular sovereignty. Below we discuss three major *pathologies* related to political leaders and other elites, the media, and public opinion that weaken or at times short-circuit democratic accountability.

Pathologies of American Democracy

Political Elites

Strategic Communications, Unintended Consequences, and Manipulation

A long-standing theme in age-old discussions of orderly government is the role of “benevolent” leaders in educating the public to sacrifice its narrow, selfish instincts in favor of policies that advance the public good and the national interest. “The king” was presented as a symbol of the nation that acted in its overall interests (Pitkin 1969). The framers of the US Constitution, of course, revolted against monarchy and harbored a suspicion of human nature, but they nonetheless assumed that the proper balancing of personal motivation and institutional checking would induce elected representatives to serve the nation's interests. In Federalist Paper No. 10, James Madison argued that the “public voice, pronounced by the representatives of the people...will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves.” One of the clearest statements of elected representatives as benevolent leaders comes from Edmund Burke, a British Member of Parliament, who insisted that “Your representative owes you, not his industry only, but his judgment; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion.”

Decades of research demonstrate, though, that the “public good” is rarely self-evident but is rather the product of multiple and competing interpretations, which often arise from divergent policy goals and philosophies, clashing interests and values, and differing personalities (Dahl 1989). Presidents and their advisers as well as other elected officials are influenced by core personality traits such as their self-esteem and need for positive reinforcement and their level of energy and engagement. James David Barber's (1972) analysis of presidential character, for instance, contrasts the strong self-esteem and energetic engagement of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who forcefully reached and communicated the dramatic decision to lead America through the Great Depression and Second World War, as opposed to the low-esteem and compulsively driven personality of Richard Nixon, who engaged in lawbreaking, manipulation, and deception in directing the cover-up of the Watergate Hotel and expansion of the Vietnam War into neighboring countries.

In addition to personality, policy goals and partisan philosophies have increasingly motivated American politicians. Since political parties formed

competing camps in the early nineteenth century, the split between parties has varied over time and, since the 1970s, has sharply widened along ideological lines with Democrats becoming more consistently liberal and Republicans more conservative with regard to the scope of government across the full range of economic issues—including taxation, spending, and regulation (Chapters 36 and 39 in this volume examine these issues; see McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 2006; Fiorina with Abrams 2009; Fiorina with Abrams and Pope 2011). This polarization was evident during the presidency of Barack Obama when nearly all Democrats voted to enact national health reform and all Republicans voted in opposition. Civil rights and social issues (including those related to women's rights, abortion, and religious practice) instigated or reinforced the polarization (see Chapters 37, 38, and 39 in this volume; Carmines and Stimson 1989). During the Bush administration (through this writing, 2001–10), the partisan division extended further than in the past to foreign policy and national security issues—most notably the war in Iraq (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006, 2007; Snyder, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro 2009; Jacobson 2010). Southern Democrats in Congress, who had staunchly opposed civil rights and liberal labor policies, were gradually replaced by Republicans or more liberal Democrats, or they switched parties. Moderate to liberal Republicans on social issues went through a similar conversion, as past leaders like Senators Jacob Javits, Edward Brooke, Charles Percy, and Clifford Case have become nearly extinct within the GOP.

Partisan loyalty is a primary driver of the agendas and policy formulations of authoritative political figures. Research shows that the intense views of partisans influence the positions of presidents more than majority opinion (Wood 2009). This pattern of partisan-driven policymaking defies both the expectations of “benevolent” leaders devoted to the overall public good and the norms of popular sovereignty—that is, responsiveness to the policy preferences of the mass public.

The movement of the major political parties into divergent and ideologically consistent programmatic organizations pushed the United States toward the “responsible two-party system” model that many political scientists in the 1950s recommended to enhance accountability (American Political Science Association 1950). Despite the hopefulness of earlier political scientists, contemporary partisan polarization in the US has contributed to a partisan deadlock that requires super-majorities to move most legislation of significance (McCarty 2007) and erodes the ability of elites to accurately assess and design policies to respond to the world around them. Although government officials are more experienced in designing policy and the

public may defer to them (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), they may also suffer—especially in the ideologically polarized and emotionally charged environment that has emerged—from misperceptions (Jervis 1976) and closed-mindedness or “epistemic closure,” that distorts their analysis and prevents them from critically evaluating assumptions, tracking real-world conditions, or understanding alternative perspectives (e.g., as some conservatives themselves have debated; Douthat 2010). They are as vulnerable as the public, as we shall see below, to biases resulting from “motivated reasoning” and related processes. Recent research by Philip Tetlock (2005) has shown that elite-level “expert” judgments and predictions can vary widely, producing results that may, on average, be no more accurate than those of non-experts.

Obsessive-compulsive and withdrawn personalities and divergent policy goals among government officials, as well as heightened perceptions of risk, can spur the most serious threat to democracy—outright manipulation and deception. Effective control over the content and flow of relevant information has most often occurred on foreign policy and national security issues and, especially, during the initial formulation of policy because the executive branch can often control access to intelligence and prevent the opposition from challenging the president's accounts (Schuessler 2010; Page and Shapiro 1992, chs. 9–10; on manipulation more broadly, see Le cheminant and Parrish 2010). Confidential documents released as part of the Pentagon Papers revealed that President Lyndon Johnson deliberately misled Americans about the Vietnam War; he simultaneously instructed the Defense Department to increase US troop levels (a decision that would ultimately deploy 500,000) and to “minimize any appearance of sudden changes in policy.”

Political elites understand that increasing the perception of national threat can increase the public's *fear* and susceptibility to being manipulated (Koh 1990; Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011; see Chapter 25 in this volume on risk aversion). Government officials may be especially prone to deviate from accepted norms of democratic governance when they harbor strong convictions about the threat to the national interest and face intense pressure from supportive partisans, organized interests, and campaign contributors (Winter and Page 2009).

Growing Challenges to Effective Democratic Governance

Political elites are a source of distortion and, at times, outright deception. Hopeful accounts of benevolent elites who selflessly serve the national interest have given way to accumulating evidence of manipulation and the routinized processes of polarization that corrode the notion of a consensual “public good” and “expert answers” of which technocrats and elite theorists once dreamed (Dahl 1989). The determined efforts of presidents and other political leaders to move (rather than follow) public opinion to rally support for partisan agendas raise sobering questions about the nature and scope of democratic accountability. The threat of elite devotion to narrow, particularistic policy goals and to using manipulation and deception to forestall public backlash is an age-old one.

Today's intensified interdependence of information development and distribution, which this volume has charted (see Chapter 1), increases two contemporary threats of political elites to democratic accountability. The first is that political leaders enjoy increased capacities to deliberately short-circuit citizen oversight directly or indirectly by misleading the media and ordinary citizens. While changes in traditional and online media have made possible a new level of social networking and empowered everyday citizens as co-producers of socially shared information, they have also increased the opportunities for elites to reach citizens and enhanced their ability to unify their base of political support. The second threat is inadvertent and relates to the interaction of a large, diverse, and often uncoordinated set of operations and organizational routines that generate the information that reaches most Americans. The information about policy and politics that reaches individuals is often merely the accidental by-product of a complicated chain of events: the crafted statements and actions by presidents and other government authorities trigger disparate reactions by the traditional and online media that often defy the plans of political elites. Although the information that reaches Americans is often unplanned by political leaders, it nonetheless affects the mass public in ways that foster misunderstandings, distractions from real-world developments, and inflated fears, which in turn diminish the capacity of citizens, fan political conflict, and complicate efforts to govern. We focus next on how the organizational designs of the media and the dynamics of public opinion interact with the mobilization and communications strategies of political elites, often in unintended ways.

Media Reflexes

Political leaders and the public alike have been quick to blame the media for their dissatisfaction with politics—for reporting on news in ways that stoke the flames of conflict and for infusing public debate with triviality (from haircuts to sporting preferences). Appearing on CBS News's *Face the Nation* on September 29, 2009, President Obama complained that the new media era in which cable news and Internet blogs operate around the clock “focus on the most extreme elements on both sides. They can't get enough of the conflict—it's catnip to the media right now.” The consequence, he charged, is that “it is more difficult to solve the problems.” Obama's complaints were echoed by his predecessor, George W. Bush, who fingered the media “filter” for fuelling political conflict and public confusion. The complaint of political elites—and a genuine strain on democracy—is that citizens are not accurately monitoring societal problems and the actions of government and its leaders. Despite the efforts of political elites to shift responsibility, the sources of this breakdown rest with them: false and misleading information launched by one of the warring factions in American politics is reported and distributed by traditional and especially online media, which in turn spurs misperceptions and reinforces growing partisan perceptual biases and reinforces elite divisions.

There are two reasons that today's 24/7 information environment fosters and amplifies political conflict and public confusion perhaps more so than in the past. The first are the “silos of bias” that have emerged among traditional and online media. Traditional media have long been scrutinized to detect a liberal or conservative bias, especially when the increasing concentration of ownership and control of news outlets potentially limited the range and diversity of news available to the public to receive. This past accusation that “the media have a liberal bias” or “a conservative bias” has become moot. The reality today is that cable news and online options have proliferated options to serve a wide range of political perspectives from liberalism (ably served by MSNBC and other traditional and online media) to conservatism, which is supplied by Fox News and other media (Baum and Groeling 2008, 2010; Groeling 2008; Groseclose and Milyo 2005; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2006). These media outlets have used their political orientation to attract ideological niches that generate revenues and economic success, reversing the earlier business model that embraced “objectivity” and “neutrality” as a recipe for building the largest market share possible (Hamilton 2004; Gentzkow and Shapiro 2008, 2010). This ideological segmentation of the media market parallels the emergence of the partisan

press in the nineteenth century and serves a similar function: it enables political elites to reach their core supporters, which in turn perpetuates or further exacerbates the polarization that many observers and some government officials lament.

The proliferation of partisan information sources has redefined the organization and control of information. The long-standing fear that large businesses would buy up media organizations to concentrate control over information and entertainment and reduce diversity and competition has resurfaced as media magnates have attempted to buy up multiple news outlets in the same market (see Baker 2006). Although concentration has increased, the expansion of traditional and online media sources may have outstripped the capacity of any one organization to literally control what individuals learn. The structure of today's information prevents the monopolization of information as was previously feared. Indeed, arguably the greater risk today is the dispersion (rather than concentration) of divergent streams of information, with segmented concentrations on the left and right as illustrated by MSNBC and Fox News.

The second and related threat to today's information environment and the needs of a democratic citizenry is the decline of independent investigative journalism. The decline of newspapers and “hard” news television reporting in reaction to shrinking audiences and revenue from advertising has come at a cost: although the quality of news reporting over the past three decades should not be overstated, its news gathering did monitor most major societal problems and many government policies (as Michael Schudson suggests in Chapter 4 in this volume; see also Downie and Schudson 2009). The decline of traditional news media and their labor-intensive (and therefore expensive) “shoe-leather” journalism has diminished quality reporting as a primary source for most Americans, a development that is compounded by the fact that many online information sites rely on (selectively) reposting the reporting by the traditional press—a supply that is shrinking and losing its depth.

Public Opinion: Public Competence and Elite Dissonance and Deceit

Today's informational interdependence widens and strengthens the impact of political elites and the media on public opinion, with significant costs to American democracy. One of the most striking contrasts has occurred between the degree of public agreement on many social and economic issues and problems (Fiorina with Abrams and Pope 2011; Page and Jacobs

2009; see Chapter 39 in this volume) and the wide polarization among political elites that precludes compromises in enacting changes in public policy (Fiorina with Abrams 2009; Brownstein 2007; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). The answer to this puzzle lies in the effects of elite mobilization strategies and communications and the inadvertent consequences of today's information system, which have diminished and distorted the provision of quality information that allows citizens and community groups to assess the real-world challenges facing them and to consider appropriate remedies. In today's world of informational interdependence, citizens often do not receive and process the best available information and, as a result, the quality of public opinion is compromised, leaving Americans ill-informed or unaware of critical national challenges.

Detecting the culpability for today's new information system rests on a fundamental question: are citizens up to the task of serving as informed and enlightened influences on government policy? Put another way, should we blame citizens for the ills of American politics today?

Although elite and media commentary tend to blame citizens for their lack of knowledge and engagement, decades of research have found that the opinions of the public are rational based on the information that is available. The culprits for what ails American politics today are political elites and the system that organizes and distributes information. We begin by reviewing research on the competence of everyday Americans and then turn to the ill-effects of political elites and today's information system.

The Rational Public

Research on the nature of public opinion has focused on three dimensions: knowledge, coherence, and stability. From the framing of the US Constitution through the 1960s, the prevailing elite view of the mass public was that it was irrational and not to be trusted as a guide to government policymaking. The Constitution's framers repeatedly warned that ordinary individuals were prone to flights of intolerant “passion” and lacked the knowledge and experience to reach sensible policy judgments; this was the primary motivation for adopting a “scheme of representation” to stand in as the “voice” of the people. Leading political observers—most notably Walter Lippman (1925)—derided the competence of everyday citizens, pointing to their inattention and ignorance about specific issues and politics more broadly and fickle tendencies to change their preferences. Some of the earliest and most influential research on public opinion and voting was

also quite critical of the public's competence to play a constructive role in democracy, reporting that it was ignorant and lacked knowledge of key issues and political figures, tended to be volatile in its views, and held opinions that seemed idiosyncratic and lacked coherence across issues (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954; and other critics cited in Page and Shapiro 1992, chs. 1–2). This “public as ignorant” account was crystallized by Converse (1964), who portrayed the views of individuals as “nonattitudes” that lacked ideological coherence and suffered from extensive instability, making them ill-suited to guide the policy deliberations of government officials.

The early dim view of public opinion has been largely replaced by a growing body of research that reports that public opinion and the behavior of voters make sense, and are largely stable *given the information that is available* and therefore worthy of serious attention in the political process (Page and Shapiro 1992; Popkin 1991; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). This view of public opinion as rational finds that the mass public responds reasonably to new information rather than remaining fixed to outdated views; that changes in public opinion are infrequent, are tied to new information, and do not involve wild fluctuations; and that the public draws meaningful distinctions among issues and alternative policies based on a consistent set of underlying values and beliefs, and information “heuristics” or shortcuts (see Popkin 1991; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). The most persuasive evidence is based on *aggregate* public opinion data—namely, the overall percentages in polls—that document the rationality of *collective* opinion. For instance, the decline in support for Barack Obama during 2010 can reasonably be traced—as news reports often do—to the slow and uneven economic recovery and other disappointments. The rationality of aggregate opinion partly reflects the “miracle of aggregation”; that is, the views of individuals responding to real-world developments cancel out those who are distracted and errors in measurement are also canceled out (for example, Page and Shapiro 1992). Another explanation is that collective deliberation about events and changing conditions equip the diverse public to learn through the media and interactions with others (Jacobs, Cook, and Delli Carpini 2009; Landemore forthcoming; S. E. Page 2007).

Although there is now wide agreement about this interpretation of aggregate public opinion (especially in the media's own narratives; but cf. Chapter 16 in this volume), the stability and competence of individual-level opinion has been the subject of serious questions. Some research has found fluctuations

and mistaken evaluations by individuals as they react to policy issues and politicians (compared to more “enlightened” opinions; Chapter 35 in this volume; Althaus 2003; Bartels 1996; Caplan 2007; Luskin 2003). These, however, may reflect elite deception or inadvertent priming or framing (see below), or understate the extent to which individuals consistently use their values and *constructive* information shortcuts or heuristics (including partisanship until recently, which we return to below; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008). In addition, some research at the individual level has questioned whether members of the general public harbor dogmatic, authoritarian, or ethnocentric personalities (Hetherington and Weiler 2009; Kinder and Kam 2009). On the other hand, there are variations in the impact of emotion and personality, which can contribute to rational rather than irrational psychological processes (see Chapter 24 in this volume; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Marcus, Neumann, and MacKuen 2000). Moreover, there is evidence that segments of the population with higher levels of knowledge hold different opinions than lower-knowledge subgroups (including greater support for rights and liberties) and may reach different evaluations of candidates (Chapter 35 in this volume; Althaus 2003; Gilens 2001; Bartels 1996). These differences, however, have not been very large: the degree of *changes* over time in informed versus ill-informed opinions has rarely differed by much (though even small differences can determine close elections; Erikson 2007).

In short, the public exhibits substantial competence based on the information available to it. This capability, however, does not preclude the possibility that the measures of their views may be flawed. The veracity and value of polling has long been questioned (see Chapter 16 in this volume; Rogers 1949; Bishop 2005). In addition, reliance on single questions, as a referendum, to assess the public's attitudes will often miss the complexity of public opinion (see Chapter 22 in this volume; Schuman 1986).

The Ill-Effects of Political Elites

Because public opinion relies on the content and tenor of the information that is available, political elites and the media exert enormous influence on the public. We discuss two interrelated processes that affect public opinion: elite strategies to drive the public and the inadvertent interactions of the information system and the public's political attitudes.

Elite mobilization strategies.

Under certain conditions the efforts by political elites—especially authoritative government officials—to influence public opinion can succeed. As in the cases of Johnson's concealment of his decision to send more troops to Vietnam, the dependence of the media and ordinary individuals on the White House for information on national security policy makes them particularly vulnerable to manipulation and deception. The public's reaction to Johnson's escalation of the war remained relatively compliant for several years after his decision due to the administration's control over information.

The routine operations of the White House and other senior government officials to develop strategies to “control the flow of information” (according to a Clinton administration advisor) can affect the government agenda—the issues and topics that receive sustained attention. The White House's use of nationally televised speeches by presidents—including their State of the Union addresses at the beginning of the year—are often quite effective tools for agenda-setting through their effects on the subjects covered by the press and the concerns of Americans (Cohen 1997). For instance, the Obama White House successfully used a national presidential address in September 2009 to refocus the debate over health reform on unmet needs and excessive costs after the “Tea Party” protests dominated press coverage in August (Jacobs and Skocpol 2010).

Information system effects and public attitudes.

Today's interdependent information system spans not only the large, diverse, and spread-out traditional media but also a sea of innumerable individual and organized online operations. While the ownership patterns, shared organizational models, and pyramidal networks of the information system that operated through the 1990s produced similar reporting patterns, the information produced and distributed by the new mass media system is largely uncoordinated and often discordant. It generates effects on public opinion that are often not the intention of political elites. We point to two.

First, the interaction of political elites and the media leads to processes of *priming*, which boosts the public's attention to specific issues, and *framing*, which orchestrates how an issue is presented to the American public (see Chapters 11 and 12 in this volume). During 2010 Barack Obama preferred to focus public attention on the scheduled troop withdrawal from Iraq rather than on a languid economy, and the White House developed a variety of tactics to prime the press and thereby the public to achieve its objectives.

But political opponents who were intent on attacking the President to boost their opportunities in the mid-term elections, as well as the media, which “indexed” the genuine conflict in Washington (Bennett 1990), focused attention on the level of unemployment and other worrisome economic indicators; Obama's follow-through on his commitment to withdraw 100,000 troops in Iraq received little sustained attention.

In addition, the White House works hard to frame particular issues to drive how they are presented. For instance, Richard Nixon portrayed protesters against the war in Vietnam as disruptive and dishonoring US troops while the protesters attempted to present themselves as honorable dissenters lawfully exercising their constitutional rights. How the press organized their stories about the protesters determined if they attracted broader support (as in the latter frame) or opposition (former frame). The media also use frames on political and policy developments. Although both Bush's drive to reform Social Security and Clinton's attempt to enact health reform sought to focus on the merits of policy change, the press often framed its presentation of these reform episodes in terms of political conflict, which tended to evoke the public's cynicism as they worried that reliable retirement benefits and their existing access to health care were under threat (see Chapter 39 in this volume; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

The second and perhaps most striking effect of today's information environment relates to its impact on ideological partisanship (“partisan sorting”) and misperceptions. Among everyday Americans, those who identify as Democrats or as Republicans have long differed in their baseline political opinions and policy preferences, and partisanship is the single most influential determinant of vote choice (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1960). Recent research demonstrates that the information system's reaction to the polarization among officeholders has had significant effects that have accentuated the political divide among ordinary Americans, contributing to deadlock in the governing process and muted government responsiveness to majority opinion.

The efforts of partisan leaders combined with the press coverage of them and the associated conflict has increased the intensity of political conflict between Republicans and Democrats as well as liberals and conservatives. The top-down national strategies of political elites to mobilize sympathetic partisans has prompted Democrats to self-identify more consistently as “liberal” and Republicans as “conservative,” and to adopt corresponding

positions on economic, social, and foreign policy issues (for example, Levendusky 2009; Fiorina with Abrams and Pope 2011; Layman, Carsey, and Horowitz 2006; Bafumi and Shapiro 2009; Abramowitz 2010; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006, 2007). The partisan strategies in major recent political episodes—from the impeachment of President Bill Clinton, the fight over who won the 2000 presidential election, and the divisive 2004, 2006, and 2008 elections—widened the partisan and ideological gap among Americans (Jacobson 2010). Echoing and accentuating the messages and strategies of dueling political elites, the traditional media—and increasingly the Internet—have magnified the political divide and deepened the emotional reactions of partisans and ideologues (see Mutz 2006; Sunstein 2007, 2009; Prior 2007; Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell 2010; Stroud 2010).

The traditional and online media have not only accelerated the sorting of Americans into opposing political camps but have also fueled selective or faulty perceptions of *objective reality and facts*. Ideally, one might expect individuals to collect facts from all easily available sources, assess them, and then develop a reasoned set of preferences about specific policy prescriptions and general approaches to policy remedies. By contrast, the new systems of informational interdependence have reversed this chain of reasoning: partisanship and ideology operate increasingly as misleading heuristics, leading to selective exposure to information and producing a degree of perceptual bias that had not previously existed (cf. Bartels 2002; Gerber and Green 1998, 1999). Although cognition has long been considered a means for “thinking through” issues and candidate choices based on information instead of reflexively making flip decisions based on emotions and pre-set attitudes, a growing body of research shows that motivation shapes reasoning and information gathering. The increasingly emotional and high-decibel divisions among partisan elites that are conveyed and amplified by the media have produced “motivated reasoning” and “motivated skepticism,” which affects the exposure, acquisition, acceptance, and use of new factual information (see Chapters 9, 15, 23, 27 in this volume; and the reviews in Taber and Lodge 2006; Mutz 2007; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008; Manjoo 2008; Slothuus and De Vreese 2010).

Instead of individuals with higher levels of education and cognitive engagement exercising the greatest resistance to the winds of passion (as the Constitution's framers assumed), they are most vulnerable to perceptual biases—their prior theories and political attitudes determine how they seek out and evaluate new information rather than the other way round (see Chapter 1 in this volume; Bennett and Iyengar 2008, 2010). It turns

out that having the cognitive ability to construct ostensibly reasonable justifications makes the better-educated and -informed more prone to reject new information that clashes with their strongly held partisan and ideological positions. Research has shown that the better-educated and -informed who support a host of distinct issues (from gun control and affirmative action to cracking down on crime and welfare) seek out information that confirms their preexisting opinions and dismiss reports that contradict them (Taber and Lodge 2006; Taber, Cann, and Kucsova 2009; Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008). The best-educated Republicans, for example, were especially resistant to acknowledging evidence that repudiated the primary rationales for invading Iraq—weapons of mass destruction and connections with the al-Qaeda terrorists who attacked the US on September 11, 2001 (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2006; Jacobson 2010; Gaines et al. 2007). Although economic conditions are ostensibly objective information that can be used to evaluate politicians' performance, individuals with strongly held partisan attitudes have tended to take note of economic conditions to reward only their preferred party's officeholders in power when times are good and to punish only those of the *opposition* party in power when they are not good; this helps explain the continued strong support of Republicans for Bush and of Democrats for Obama during periods of economic decline (Lebo and Cassino 2007; Achen and Bartels 2006). Conservatives with greater education and more engagement with politics have been much *less* likely than other conservatives to acknowledge the evidence of increasing income differences (Bartels 2008). What is also striking is that these and other significant misperceptions can persist (Nyhan and Reifler 2010; Redlawsk, Civettini, and Emmerson 2010).

For Americans who are not hard-core partisans, the partisan press and the media's more general preoccupation with political conflict prompts many to turn to *non-political* media and information options (see Prior 2007). This helps to explain the odd juxtaposition of inflamed partisans and disinterested spectators.

In short, motivated reasoning triggered by elite mobilization strategies and media reporting has produced a worrisome pattern in which accurate factual information may neither be perceived nor accepted by Americans with strongly held political attitudes, including the most educated and inclined to follow public affairs. Partisans have polarized because they literally see different worlds: they follow and absorb dramatically different portrayals of policy debates and real-world developments, which reinforce preexisting perceptions and assumptions about threats and opportunities.

These dynamics have sobering effects on American democracy. The flames of partisan conflict among the public, lit by political elites and fueled by the media, feed back on politics; they contribute to partisan deadlock in government and to greater responsiveness to comparatively extreme partisan and ideological activists and favored interests than to the public writ large (McCarty 2007; Bartels 2008; Wood 2009; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jacobs and Page 2005).

Conclusion: The Phantom Elite

Many of the problems with American democracy today originate with its political leaders and other elites. The role and impact of government officials and their allies that have emerged from decades of research depart dramatically from the benevolent leader accounts which had portrayed them as beacons of the public good and the foundation for a working democracy. Instead, we have found that partisanship, ideology, special interest bidding, and other factors drive the policy goals of political elites. In response, the traditional press and new online media have focused their attention on the strategic manipulations of political elites and often the mobilization of counterfactions. And the ostensible guardians of American democracy—the best-educated and most engaged and political leaders themselves—turn out to be particularly susceptible to emotional reasoning and to reaching views that are not consistently wise or “correct.”

The hope for American democracy lies with reform at the top. The first challenge might be to change the behavior of traditional media outlets and to tap the new online outlets in the service of democracy. One recommendation is for government or non-profit foundations to subsidize reporting that is devoted to public service (Downie and Schudson 2009); these could in theory moderate the news media and counterbalance current reporting and commentary that cater to the ideological extremes. Although an intriguing proposal, there is strong opposition to government funding of the media and several foundations have already invested heavily in public media outlets with only modest overall effects in improving democratic processes. Another possibility is to capitalize on technological breakthroughs in online media as they begin what will likely be a series of innovations in business models and news platforms.

The starting point, though, for more substantive press reporting and reality-based citizens lies with political elites and the need to change the current behavior of highly partisan leaders and in turn their effects on public opinion. It is possible that expanded partisan conflict may open the door to

centrist third party candidates, which may put pressure on party leaders to temper their more extreme elements. Another possibility is to change the party primaries to *open* them to all voters in order to encourage and aid candidates in each party who appeal to median voters.

Although remedies are elusive, what is clear is that the burden of democracy has shifted from skepticism about the competence of citizens to doubts and concerns about the wisdom and responsibility of their political leaders.

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