

Introduction

Facing the Challenge of Democracy

Paul M. Sniderman and Benjamin Highton

IN POLITICS, SKEPTICS OUTBID CYNICS. A cynic questions whether people will do the right thing even though they know the right reason to do it. A skeptic doubts that they know the right reason and in any case questions whether they have the competence to do the right thing when it comes to politics.

Skeptics far outnumber cynics in the debate over whether ordinary citizens are capable of discharging the duties of citizenship. A long parade of studies has shown that citizens fail minimally challenging tests of knowledge of public affairs and institutions.¹ A still deeper vein of skepticism contends that citizens tend to make a muddle of things when reasoning about politics. We have too few fingers on our hands and toes on our feet to count the number of studies showing that citizens vote for candidates and parties committed to policies that will make them worse off rather than better off; or hold contradictory preferences, clamoring for lower taxes, for example, while demanding more government spending for social services; or are embarrassingly susceptible to errors and biases in their reasoning; or make political choices for comically irrelevant reasons—most notoriously, punishing incumbents for shark attacks at tourist beaches. (And so on.)² Naturally, a barrage of counterarguments has been mounted. Ignorance of politics is rational, Downs famously argues.³ Or others (including Downs) contend that even knowing as little about politics as citizens do, they nonetheless can reason efficiently through the use of judgmental shortcuts.⁴ And still others have argued that even if most citizens make a muddle of things, elections are decided by changes at the margin, and at the margin, choices are informed.⁵ (And so on.)

What is this tug-of-war between camps with opposing judgments of citizen competence about? It is, most fundamentally, about the capacity of citizens to make politically coherent choices. One way to gain traction in this tug-of-war—not the only way, to be sure, but all the same a pivotal one—is to understand as deeply as possible the properties of political preferences of ordinary citizens. Accordingly, the studies here fall in three sections. Part I focuses on the political logic of preference consistency; part II on the most prominent feature of political preferences in

contemporary politics—polarization; part III on the relationship between policy preferences and electoral representation.

Part I: The Political Logic of Preference Consistency

We begin with a definition. By a “preference,” we mean a disposition to respond consistently, either negatively or positively, to a focal object.⁶ Political preferences are variously denominated, running (in order of generality of scope) from ideological orientation, basic values, partisanship, policy preferences, to electoral choices. In promoting political consistency to a top-of-the-list item on our research agenda, some may suspect that we are writing tongue-in-cheek, since consistency in political preferences is precisely what ordinary citizens supposedly lack.⁷ So we want to begin with a paradox: in politics, citizens must sometimes make inconsistent choices in order, ultimately, to have made a consistent one.

The logic of this paradox is set out in chapter 1. This chapter, by Lupia, makes two distinct contributions, one having to do with the measurement of preferences, the other having to do with the theory of choice. On the first front, Lupia brings out how the preferences of citizens may appear fickle and incoherent because of measurement error. Lupia does this, we are pleased to say, not by issuing the customary hortatory injunction to improve measurement, but by putting on the table specific improvements in widely used measures in public opinion research. All the same, we want to concentrate on the second front, his argument on the theory of political choice, since it is wide in its application and deep in its implications.

The dominant approach in the study of political choice, Lupia observes, is “institution free.” Consider the paradigmatic example of this approach—the canonical Downsian model of rational choice. In this model, rationality requires voters consistently—indeed, invariantly—to choose the candidate whose position is closest to theirs. But, Lupia argues, making the “correct” choice is not so straightforward; political choices are institution-dependent. Consider governments made up of party coalitions. A moderate may more closely realize her preferences by voting, not for her moderate party, but instead for an extreme one, and by “overshooting” her true preference, pull the overall coalition closer to it.⁸ Hence the paradox: to wind up with a consistent choice, it sometimes is necessary to deviate along the way. This is not a matter of being inconsistent. It is a textbook case of being strategic.

But are we begging the question, presupposing that citizens’ political preferences are politically coherent rather than demonstrating it? Yes,

there are strategic choices in politics, and therefore the appearance of preference inconsistency may be explained away. But why take inconsistency as the starting point, as though it (or the appearance of it) is the characteristic state of affairs? There actually are two questions here that are being asked at the same time. Is it the case that citizens put their preferences together coherently? And, supposing that they do, how do they do it? But although the two questions are distinct, the fate of the first is tied to that of the second. Against a background of thirty years and more of conflicting results, no merely empirical analysis can constitute dispositive evidence. We will not be persuaded that citizens make coherent political choices until we have good ideas how they can pull it off.

Good ideas, we say, because we have a deep-in-the-bones conviction that there is no single sovereign theory of political reasoning equally applicable to all regardless of who or what in politics we may be concerned to understand. But we are persuaded that making the empirical case for preference consistency depends on coming up with new ideas about how citizens can pull this off. One such new idea is Page and Xie's provocative theory of "purposive belief systems." Their theory is provocative on two grounds. The first has to do with intellectual strategy. Contrary to the drunk who looks for his keys not where he lost them, next to his car, but a half block away "cause that's where the light is," Page and Xie look where the light is dim. They examine preferences where we, at any rate, would be least likely to expect consistency—the domain of foreign policy preferences, in particular, American public opinion toward China. There, of all places, they apply their theory of purposive belief systems.⁹ Schematically, the theory is built around three classes of constructs—values, goals, and threats. Taking account of the interplay on the three, they summarize the evidence as suggesting that citizens "tend to think sensibly about politics, instrumentally deriving their policy preferences from values they hold, threats they perceive, and goals they embrace."

Their theory of purposive belief systems is provocative on another ground. Earlier, Page (with Shapiro) mounted arguably the most theoretically grounded critique of the consensus view of citizens as empty-headed (the nonattitudes problem), or muddle-headed (the lack of constraint problem), or both.¹⁰ Leveraging Condorcet's theorem, their argument granted that the policy preferences of individuals had a large component of randomness. But taken as a whole, these random errors tend to cancel each other out, they argued. The result is that the collective opinion of the public tends to be "real, stable, and sensible,"¹¹ even though the opinions of (many of) the individuals who make up the public are not. This, roughly, is the so-called miracle of aggregation. In contrast, in their theory of purposive belief systems, Page and Xie advance a striking conjecture:

“[Mere] aggregation, alone, will not do it; as a leading political scientist once pointed out, ‘a thousand times nothing is still nothing.’”¹² Coherence in the public as a whole, Page and Xie now propose, is grounded in the coherence of individuals’ preferences. In their words,

empirical relationships among logically connected values, interests, beliefs, and policy preferences are apparently strong enough so that, if and when most Americans agree on centrally relevant values and beliefs, majorities of Americans will come to favor a set of policies that coherently and consistently reflect those values and beliefs. . . . The aggregation of individual opinions can indeed dispose of offsetting random errors, but it will reveal something coherent at the collective level only if certain coherent tendencies are shared in the minds of individuals. We believe that we have uncovered such tendencies.¹³

There are not many examples of political scientists rethinking career-defining ideas. This is one.

To this point, we have been proceeding as though the meaning of a preference is obvious: preferences are “tastes.” A liberal is a liberal just to the degree that he has a consistent taste for liberal policies; an isolationist is an isolationist just to the degree that she has a consistent taste for isolationist policies. Most often, indeed, very nearly always, this is the right way—or at least a satisfactory way—to think of preferences both theoretically and operationally. But it is not the only way. In their analysis of “cosmopolitanism,” Jackman and Vavreck bring out a different way to think about—and measure—preferences.

Preferences may be conceived as “exercise dispositions.” An exercise disposition is a tendency to perform certain acts. This is the way that they conceive of cosmopolitanism; hence the aptness of Appiah’s analogy to conversation in bringing out the meaning of cosmopolitanism.¹⁴ It also is the key to their measurement strategy: determine what people have done (or not done) rather than what they like (or dislike). To be sure, Jackman and Vavreck treat cosmopolitanism as a hybrid, sometimes speaking of it as though it consists in the exercise of faculties, sometimes as though it involves a set of distinctive tastes. This is not unreasonable since the activities that being cosmopolitan involves and the tastes that are acquired as a consequence of these activities are entangled. But it is by virtue of treating what people do, not what they say they like, that Jackman and Vavreck make an advance both conceptually and operationally. And the result? A breakthrough in the study of race and contemporary American politics.

Why do we describe their uncovering a connection between being cosmopolitan and voting for Obama as a breakthrough? Not because cosmopolitanism is the key to understanding Obama’s victory. It hardly swept him to the Democratic Party nomination and then to the White

House. What Jackman and Vavreck have done is provide a showcase example of the value of looking at the politics of race with fresh eyes. An enormous effort has been invested over the last forty years in undergirding claims that racism remains a dominating force in American politics.¹⁵ Yet, as one political scientist pungently remarked, “But the black guy won.” Obama’s victory is not a demonstration that racism has shriveled up. Prejudice remains an influence in American life and politics. But Obama’s victory does suggest that the accounts now on the table that have insisted that prejudice still has a tight grip on the minds of white Americans have neglected countervailing factors. Hence the importance of Jackman and Vavreck’s imaginative idea to add cosmopolitanism to the list of the usual suspects in the analysis of racism—and, we suspect, to the broader analysis of political choice.

The economy of discovery in political science is instructive. Simple insights tend to give bigger payoffs than complex formulations. Mutz and Dilliplane’s study is a trophy illustration of this maxim. Political campaigns are increasingly seen as political events that shape—or at least have the potential to shape—political preferences in a host of ways. Mutz and Dilliplane provide a high-octane example of asymmetric responses of the citizenry to campaign events. The question they ask is, what difference did McCain’s choice of Sarah Palin as a running mate make? This question, they also make plain, actually is a bundle of questions. The one at the center of their analysis is what effect did Palin’s selection have on voters’ perceptions of McCain?

To answer that question, Mutz and Dilliplane make two clever moves. First, they calculate separately the effects of increasing and of decreasing ideological distance between McCain’s (perceived) ideological location and the voter’s. Second, they calculate the effects of these two changes separately for Democrats, independents, and Republicans and liberals, moderates, and conservatives. Consistent with common sense, McCain’s choice of Palin operated as a signal. Voters perceived McCain to be more conservative as a consequence of his choice. More interesting by far, and consistent with Mutz and Dilliplane’s reasoning, the effect varied with voters’ partisanship and ideological orientation. As they write, “the shift *toward* their own views that those on the right perceived in McCain was more sizable than the shift *away* perceived by those on the left and in the middle.”¹⁶

Mutz and Dilliplane take pains to show that McCain made no net gain by his selection of Palin. But as a matter of theory, their bringing to light the asymmetric effects of candidate behavior opens the door to a richer analysis of candidate strategy. Indeed, at the limit, it removes the tension between making strident appeals to mobilize the base and making moderate ones to appeal to the median voter.

To this point, our focus has been preference consistency. But it would be folly to ignore inconsistency. Hence the importance of Ellis and Stimson's contribution. They bring inconsistency front-and-center—an inconsistency, moreover, with in-your-face strategic implications. In their words, “when asked about specific government programs and specific social goals, the American public generally wants the government to do more, spend more, and redistribute more. But at the same time, citizens are considerably more likely to identify themselves as conservatives than as liberals.”¹⁷

The time-honored explanation why a substantial number think their outlook on politics is conservative when, in fact, their policy preferences are liberal is that ordinary citizens make a muddle of political ideas. Ellis and Stimson set out on a different explanatory route. They make a strikingly original contribution by uncovering the roots of this clash of symbolic and operational ideologies.¹⁸ It does not arise out of a fit of absent-mindedness or impulsiveness or erratic reasoning. Ellis and Stimson show that there are systematic causes of why some people choose both the conservative label and liberal policy preferences. One, perhaps the most important one, is that the term “conservative” strikes in many people's minds a religious chord. When they are asked about their outlook on the world, they think of their religious outlook, and in this context, they see themselves as conservative. Again, in Ellis and Stimson's words, “When asked to choose a political ideology, they draw upon the only connotation of ‘conservatism’ with which they have a deep understanding—religious conservatism, regardless of the term's implications for real political conflict.”¹⁹ That is one part of the explanation of the contradiction. Another is the greater esteem in which the term “conservative” is held than “liberal” in the American political culture. Hence the asymmetry between right and left in American politics. On the one side, conservative elites emphasize their “conservatism” but do not advertise their conservative policies. On the other side, elite liberals appeal for support on the basis of their policies, but shrink from criticizing conservatism in and of itself. The result is a dominant media message that favors conservatism, and people who form their ideological identification on the basis of the dominant frames presented by the media become “conservative.”

Ellis and Stimson's discoveries have major implications for politics a good distance beyond the mission of this book. They offer a new depiction of the “median voter” as a “conflicted conservative,” which we would argue goes a long way toward explaining the nature of political rhetoric and political appeals in national campaigns. The discovery of conflicted conservatives also points to a deep asymmetry in American politics. Contrary to the received wisdom that sees the right as cohesive and the left as divided, it is the left that is cohesive, both supporting

liberal policies and understanding its outlook to be liberal, and it is the right that is divided, with many supporting the policies of the left while nonetheless thinking their outlook to be conservative. The implication is that there is a reservoir of support for liberal policies that can be strategically tapped by focusing political discourse at the “operational” rather than the “symbolic” level dimensions of ideology.

For the problem before us, which is to wrestle out a deeper understanding of preference consistency, Ellis and Stimson’s discovery of conflicted conservatives suggests the worth of distinguishing two types of inconsistency. One is the kind that most researchers have had in mind when referring to lack of constraint in mass belief systems: political ideas minimally related one to another. We will call this type of consistency “slack,” since there is at least the possibility of people pulling their ideas about politics together. Ellis and Stimson’s conflicted conservatives represent an altogether different kind of inconsistency. One point is this. They wind up holding inconsistent preferences, but not flatly contradictory ones, since they are at different levels of abstraction, one symbolic and the other operational. That the preferences in play are at different levels of abstraction is not inconsequential, since it provides a clue to how people can hold them simultaneously without feeling a sense of inconsistency. This is not an inconsequential point, but it is not the one that we want to highlight. Conflicted conservatives wind up holding preferences at odds with one another, not because they are indifferent to consistency, but precisely because they are motivated to achieve it. The difficulty is that they are motivated to achieve consistency with respect to two sets of considerations, social welfare policy and religious convictions, that are at odds with one another politically. This type of inconsistency we call “motivated.” It is genuine inconsistency—we do not want to suggest otherwise—but paradoxically it is inconsistency that is a product of striving for consistency within domains of life. And it is a characteristic of political thinking precisely because politics is distinctively the arena in which the conflicting claims of different domains of life—religious, economic, familial, among others—collide head-on with one another. To put the point summarily, preference consistency in politics needs to be understood against the inescapability of value conflict in politics.

Part II: Polarization and the Party System

Part II explores a signature characteristic of policy preferences in contemporary American politics—“polarization.” That the positions of party elites have become polarized, no one doubts. But how voters have reacted to elite polarization—that is a matter under active investigation. One line

of research has to do directly with preference consistency. It is consensually agreed that party identification and policy preferences are far more consistently aligned now than a generation ago,²⁰ though whether ordinary citizens have paralleled partisan elites in becoming less centrist and more extreme in their political views is hotly contested, and seems likely to remain so for a good while.²¹

Through a clever use of underutilized data, Jacobson analyzes voters' reactions to the polarization of elite position taking. Pooling the results from 650 state-level surveys in 2005 and 2006, he measures overall and partisan differences in approval of the president and senators and then sets about understanding their causes. He finds that state-level approval of President Bush followed predictable patterns. Bush had higher levels of approval in more Republican and more conservative states. What would you expect other than partisan scorecards, you might reply. But, Jacobson shows, partisans do not keep similar partisan scorecards for their senators, and who would have predicted that? Party polarization, defined as the difference in approval between Democrats and Republicans, is almost twice as large for the president as for senators. The reason: senators far more often succeed at gaining the approval of partisans of the other party (on average 42 percent). In contrast, President Bush failed in that regard with an average of just 13 percent in the state polls.

On the surface, partisans appear to be treating the president as a special case, evaluating him on a markedly more partisan and polarized basis than they do senators. Surface impressions are just that, superficial. Senatorial approval is higher and party polarization in approval is lower, Jacobson demonstrates, when senators are more moderate in their position taking. This findings brings forward some of the complexity so subtly sewn into the idea of preference consistency as ordinarily to escape notice. Initial appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, voters are being quite consistent, evaluating the president and senators on the same basis, with partisans from the other party punishing incumbents for policy extremism in both cases. Some expressions of preferences, which appear to be inconsistent, are the product of consistent adherence to a common underlying decision rule.

There is a deeper political lesson to draw from Jacobson's demonstration of a correlation between senatorial position-taking and cross-party approval. We say a deeper lesson, because it brings out of the shadows a strategic puzzle. As Jacobson observes, if senators wanted to maximize their approval ratings, then ideological moderation is the obvious strategy. But he demonstrates that a fair number of senators, who would benefit from this strategy, eschew it. Why do they not act in their elec-

toral self-interest? Because, Jacobson suggests, senators' policy preferences trump electoral consideration unless their survival is at stake. In his words, "most senators prefer to support their party and its positions because they are themselves partisans and ideologues . . . and so act as such unless moderation is a condition of political survival."²²

One reading of Jacobson's contribution is that it adds one more brick to the rising wall of evidence of a disconnect between partisan elites and the voters: elected representatives thumbing their noses, declining to adjust their positions to the voters', unless their back is to the wall. All the more reason, then, to study Aldrich and Freeze's contribution. Politicians and voters are connected, they argue, just so far as they share a common framework for interpreting, evaluating, and responding to policy proposals. Some voters care deeply about a specific policy, and are guided by their views on it alone. It is not obvious, to say the least, how representation issue-by-issue-by-issue can work in liberal democracy. An overarching framework, organizing and incorporating the issues being contested, is necessary—a framework, moreover, that is readily intelligible and repetitively communicated.

What is that framework? The left-right dimension, Aldrich and Freeze propose. This suggestion cannot fail to bring a smile to the lips of public opinion researchers of a certain age. The claim that the electorate was incapable of understanding and deploying a left-right ideological dimension was considered a golden nugget of scientific truth not so long ago. But the wheel turns, and there now is a shelf full of studies demonstrating that the public organizes its preferences along left-right lines on two policy agendas—social welfare issues and traditional social values.²³ They may not be able to define liberalism or conservatism as political philosophies. All the same, large numbers hold coherent ideological views, taking consistent liberal or conservative positions on issues on the same policy agendas. Aldrich and Freeze then point to a specific mechanism facilitating a connection between elite and voter preferences—the policy reputations of the parties. They make the case that the parties' policy reputations now have a relatively clearer meaning with regard to their location on an underlying left-right dimension. In pointing up the role of the parties' policy reputations as a communicative mechanism, Aldrich and Freeze strikingly reorient the disconnect argument. In its most common form, the disconnect argument holds that partisan elites are more polarized, *in the sense* that they bunch up at the extremes of the liberal-conservative policy dimension; while voters' preferences are not polarized, *in the sense* that they tend primarily to take moderate positions on the left-right dimension. Grant this. Aldrich and Freeze's deep point is that both are thinking about politics in the same framework. And so far as they are,

voters can participate in policy debate on the same terms as politicians and, thanks to the signaling role of parties' policy reputations, keep track of the political thrust of competing politicians' policy proposals.

Keeping track of politicians' policy proposals and keeping control of them is not the same thing, to be sure. Assume that politicians and voters share a common framework for understanding and evaluating policy proposals. That still leaves open—indeed, in some respects makes still more puzzling—the question of why politicians do not move toward the center. Why not close the gap between their (relatively) extreme positions and voters' (relatively) moderate ones? Aldrich and Freeze are uncomfortable with simply assuming that politicians take the policy positions they do because they believe what they believe. Why then do they believe what they believe, one surely is entitled to ask. To say that they believe because they believe seems grasping at thin air. Aldrich and Freeze recognize that other factors surely are at work—interest groups, to cite the most obvious example. Still, they feel it necessary to push further in search of an answer. The result: they go on to make their second—and quite powerful—insight. They look at the extent to which various strata of activists are polarized in their policy preferences. In the process, they call attention to a group of party activists that has flown under the radar screen in previous studies of party polarization: large donors to presidential candidates. Consistent with previous research, they discover a trend toward growing polarization among political activists in general. But ideological polarization, they demonstrate, has grown faster between Democrats and Republicans who give substantial presidential campaign donations, and is now larger than the degree of ideological polarization of any other activist group. Of course, more work is necessary. But Aldrich and Freeze's proposal that political candidates are responding to substantial contributors strikes us as an elegantly economical (if dispiriting) finding.

Krasno follows up on a finding of Jacobson's from the first chapter of this section: the provocative observation that candidates do not optimize. Krasno's focus is political parties, though, not individual candidates, and his story is one of ironies. Candidates need money, and as a result of court decisions, political parties have no limits on the amount of money that they can spend on candidates' behalf and a free hand (or nearly so) in choosing which candidates to spend it on. This is an era of increasing party, not candidate, dominance, it would seem to follow.

No, Krasno replies. In his account, campaigns were and remain candidate-centered, not party-centered, because candidates and parties have different interests at the end of the day. True, money plays a more important role now than in earlier eras. True also that parties help raise and spend vast sums of money. But because of the electoral logic of competition, argues Krasno, they are investors who do not invest in their own

interest as organizations. Instead, they invest where the marginal utility of their dollars is highest. In his words, “parties try to decide whom to help by determining where their help is likeliest to do the most good. That is, they try to play in the closest contests where their support might make the difference between victory and defeat for their candidate.”²⁴ And the consequence of this strategy, Krasno contends, is that the most valuable resource that the national parties can provide—namely, money—is funneled into an ever smaller number of candidates and campaigns. Hence the paradox: the parties have the resource that candidates most want but thanks to the logic of electoral competition, what should give them a command presence as national organizations reduces them to a help-mate’s role in the service of individual candidates.

Running through all these analyses is a common theme: the minimizing of electoral responsiveness in contemporary politics. Jacobson points to senators who could gain from taking more moderate positions, but choose not to do so. Aldrich and Freeze make a case for large contributors being a driver of polarization of partisan elites, which points to a positive explanation of why representatives are taking more extreme positions than their voters. Krasno makes a case that the national parties must put the interests of a relatively small number of candidates before their own interest in representing the views of the voters who identify with them. In short, all three are stories of a disconnect between voters and their representatives, not because of the limitations of ordinary citizens, but because of the dynamics of elite politics.

Supposing, on another line of argument, that there is a disconnect between partisan elites and voters, how, one wants to ask, does it play itself out in electoral politics? McGhee and Pearson provide one answer, one that develops the idea of polarization in an intriguing way, as it seems to us. All agree that party polarization in the electorate has increased, at any rate defined as consistency between voters’ party identification and the party of the candidate they vote for.²⁵ McGhee and Pearson’s contribution is to explore the micro-foundations of this aspect of polarization—or as many would prefer to say, “sorting.”²⁶ Partisan sorting refers to the proportion of Democrats and Republicans who take their party’s side on a political choice. It explicitly does not make the further presumption that the positions voters now take are more polarized—that is, less moderate—than the ones they earlier took.

According to McGhee and Pearson’s story, the key to the electoral dynamics of polarization is the reactions of voters’ of the other party to the incumbent. They now are far more likely to dislike the incumbent than they used to be, and hence are less likely to defect from their party and vote for the candidate of the other party than they used to be. The result: a more polarized (i.e., party-consistent) electorate. This is a neatly

partisan explanation of a self-evidently partisan phenomenon—namely, polarization. Also, it appears to be yet more evidence in favor of a party-centered interpretation of contemporary politics. But in an unexpected twist—unexpected by us, certainly—McGhee and Pearson dissent. If this change has been driven by voters' reactions to parties, they argue, then the ideological distance between challenger partisans and the opposing parties will have increased. Instead, McGhee and Pearson find that the ideological distance between a challenger partisan and the incumbent is much more important than the ideological distance between a challenger partisan and the incumbent's party. This finding, which complements those in Jacobson's essay, implies that incumbents, and candidates for elective office more generally, are not prisoners of the ideological reputations of their parties. This is an intriguing candidate explanation for the disconnect between politicians' and voters' preferences, though it remains to be determined whether candidates can take more extreme positions just because the parties' policy reputations are now so distinct.

Implicit to this point has been the definition of a partisan. The next chapter tackles this issue head on. By way of context, it is consensually agreed that seeing oneself as attached to one of the two parties goes along with other desirable characteristics for citizens to have. Compared to those who identify with one or the other of the major parties, independents tend to be less knowledgeable about politics, less interested, less politically aware, more likely to use the parties as a way of understanding the ideological meaning of the political alternatives on offer, and more susceptible to campaign manipulation. All this is well-established. What causes what is another matter. For that matter, being more knowledgeable about politics is not the same thing as being knowledgeable. Still and all, more voters identifying themselves with one of the political parties seems to be a better state of affairs than fewer doing so.

It is against this background that the concern over the increasing numbers of Americans who identify themselves as political independents needs to be understood. Magleby, Nelson, and Westlye tote up the evidence indicating that the proportion of independents in the electorate has significantly increased over the last generation and tick off the adverse implications that leading researchers have drawn. Yet one more illustration, it would seem, that as short of the mark as citizens have fallen in the past, they can fall still shorter.

Magleby and his colleagues do an excellent job in laying out the case for the prosecution. Why do we say an excellent job? Because they have tried to make the best case that the number of independents in the electorate has shot up, presenting the studies that come to this conclusion in clear and compelling terms, even though their own view is quite the opposite.

Here, words can so easily mislead. The canonical procedure in measuring party identification is, first, to ask citizens whether they identify with one of the parties or see themselves as an independent. Then, if they see themselves as a Democrat or a Republican, they are asked whether they see themselves as a strong Democrat or Republican. Alternatively, if they identify themselves as an independent, they are asked whether they feel closer to one of the parties or not. We have then strong partisans, weak partisans, leaners (or partisan independents), and pure independents.

In a series of publications,²⁷ Wolfinger and his students showed that from the 1950s through the 1980s, “leaners” were more like partisans—and more like strong partisans than weak ones in many ways—than pure independents, including being more interested and knowledgeable about politics. They said that they were independents. In fact, they were partisans.

That was the way things were then. But how are they now after several decades of increasing elite party polarization? Putting to use a sliver of the empirical results at their finger tips, Magleby, Nelson, and Westlye show that the apparent surge in the numbers of “independents” is a double illusion. The proportion who are pure independents is the same now as a half century ago, and partisan independents are as engaged in politics and as loyal to their party in the voting as strong partisans and significantly more so than weak partisans. Imperfect as they are, ordinary citizens are not more so now than they were.

Part III: Participation and Representation

The idea of a disconnect between politicians’ and voters’ preferences has popped up like a jack-in-the box, albeit in diverse forms. All the same, we would like to approach it from yet one more direction.

Some paradoxes are puzzles, which is a very good thing, since puzzles have solutions. A classic example of an electoral paradox that also is a puzzle has to do with turnout levels in elections and the electoral representation of preferences. The wealthy are far more likely to vote than the poor and also differ in how they vote and what policies they prefer. These undisputed facts produce a widespread belief “that if everybody in this country voted, the Democrats would be in for the next 100 years.”²⁸ Yet, political scientists who study the question tend to disagree.

Election commentators rely on the conventional wisdom because it appears to be a self-evident truth, akin to other self-evident truths that flirt with tautology—e.g., bad weather lowers turnout. In their pioneering work, however, Wolfinger and colleagues have presented striking evidence of the similarity of preferences of voters and nonvoters.²⁹ And when

we say “similarity of preferences,” we are referring to preferences over policies and values that drive contemporary politics. This includes the most fundamental political orientation, party identification, but also a host of others, including candidate preferences, policy preferences, and policy priorities. Moreover, Wolfinger and his colleagues report that similarity of preferences of voters and nonvoters is robust under alternative counterfactuals—a relaxation of registration requirements, for example, or a projection of universal (100%) turnout.

To say that the findings of Wolfinger and his colleagues have proven provocative is in the same league as describing an explosion as a substantial noise. A long-standing critique of American democracy is that turnout is low relative to other democracies. Since the well-off are more likely to vote than the poor, it follows that the American party system is biased in favor of the well-off. This critique is, for some, a self-evident truth. Hence the importance of the two studies on turnout and representation, one by Ansolabehere and Hersh, the other by Sides, Schickler, and Citrin. Each approaches the problem from a different methodological route. So it is all the more striking that the substantive conclusions of each reinforce those of the other.

Ansolabehere and Hersh introduce methodological innovations on three fronts. For one, theirs is the first national study since 1990 to validate claims to have voted, which they accomplish through an ingenious “fuzzy matching” technique comparing reported voting with digitized voter databases. For another, previous estimates of turnout bias have conflated two factors: the degree of difference between voters and reported nonvoters on relevant dimensions (e.g., education) and the distributions of relevant dimension. Ansolabehere and Hersh provide separate estimates of the two. And for yet another, they match validated voters and nonvoters not only on demographic attributes, as previous studies have done,³⁰ but also on attitudinal variables as well, surely the heart of the matter.

Their methodological advances pay off. Eliminate the counterfeit voters, and the difference between those who go the polls and those who stay home shrinks further. This is true at the individual level and in the aggregate as well. Moreover, at the state level, the apparent conservative bias among voters is cut down considerably, oftentimes evaporating completely. And consistent with all of the preceding, simulating election results under full turnout shows only modest—if any—expected differences in outcomes under full turnout compared to actual election results.

Analyzing the same problem, Sides, Schickler, and Citrin take their own trail-blazing route in their analysis of state-level exits polls and the November Voter Supplement of the Current Population Survey. They make discoveries on three fronts. First, a handful of states aside, they

show that the partisan differential (which gauges the extent to which the Democratic Party is disadvantaged) is minimally responsive to variation in turnout levels state by state. Second, and fascinatingly, they wring the actual political significance out of their statistical estimates of partisan differential, identifying the outcomes of actual elections it influenced. Finally, instead of calling it a day's work after calculating partisan differentials state by state, they identify factors explaining why partisan differential is persistently higher in some states than in others.

And what do they learn? Most importantly, even under favorable assumptions, differences between the preferences of voters and nonvoters are quite modest, averaging between just one and three percentage points. In a word, even if every legally eligible voter found her way to the voting booth, electoral outcomes would rarely change. What does this mean politically? Presidential and senatorial elections are statewide contests. Losing a state by one percent or by ten times that number costs a senatorial candidate the election and a presidential candidate a block of electoral votes. Across the 200 state-level presidential outcomes from 1992–2004, less than 10 percent switch from one party winning to the other. An even smaller number of Senate outcomes would change (3 percent) due to the less competitive nature of those elections. While not many outcomes would change under full turnout, Sides, Schickler, and Citrin do find that the variation in preferences between voters and nonvoters is systematic, arising largely as the result of variation in state-level differences rather than differences across time or election type.

Before moving on, we want to make a parenthetical comment. Here we have two teams of researchers, applying different methodological techniques to different data sets. Yet, the findings of one lead to the same broad conclusions as the findings of the other. Could this be an indication of the maturation of political science? On a related but slightly different note, the findings of both broadly support those first reported by Wolfinger and his colleagues. Yet, in pointing this out, the reports of both teams of researchers are marked by an odd tone—odd, that is, in the sense of unusual, not in the sense of off the mark. In our experience, the spirit of most political science research is adversarial. The aim is to demonstrate that what previous research had supposedly established, it hadn't established at all; indeed, a fair number of times, it had got the truth of the matter the wrong way round. In contrast, the spirit of these two studies is collegial rather than adversarial. And if someone were to wag his finger and ask, What have we learned when we have learned that what we thought was so, is so? We would turn and ask them, Can you not see how they have deepened our understanding?

A more favorable ratio of collegial- to adversarial-style research is a key to progress in the social sciences, we have become persuaded. This

gets things just the wrong way about, one might reply. Style is a function of substance when the findings of a study are additions to—but consistent with—previous research, and a collegial style naturally follows; when they are at odds with previous research, an adversarial style (the “conventional wisdom” is X, but the truth is non-X) is only to be expected. For this reason, though not only for this reason, this section on election turnout includes Knee and Green’s analysis of the effects of registration laws on voter turnout.

The basic argument underlying previous research runs as follows. To be allowed to vote requires first registering to vote, and registration requirements impose nontrivial costs. Relaxing registration requirements—for example, by coordinating voting registration with registration requirements for high-value benefits (e.g., a driver’s license)—should increase voting turnout. So Wolfinger and Rosenstone found.³¹ So also did many, though not quite all, subsequent researchers.

Reexamining the problem, Knee and Green lay out a quartet of statistical models, examining and applying them in turn. One is tempted to say that the models are examined in order of increasing complexity, and in a strictly computational sense that is correct. But to think of the progression of models as running from simple to complex gets their analytical enterprise the wrong way round. What it is about is identifying potentially misleading assumptions and then eliminating them one by one. And the result? Knee and Green’s results indicate that the apparent influences of Election Day registration and registration closing dates—the two registration laws commonly believed to be most efficacious at improving turnout—are reduced substantially, as is confidence that there are any effects at all. Their findings raise doubt about the view that turnout in America is comparatively low due to high registration costs and suggest that past and possible future institutional reforms are limited in their ability to improve participation rates in the United States. Once more, however, we want to take the liberty of appending a parenthetical comment—actually, in this case, two comments. The first is that this chapter, like the two before it, dramatizes the increase in substantive depth of understanding thanks to progress in statistical modeling. The second comment is that although the findings of this chapter call into question the findings of some analyses of Wolfinger and his colleagues, there is nothing adversarial in its presentation of the question, summary of previous research, or statistical analyses. Quite the contrary: like the two chapters that precede it, it is a model of the collegial style.

There is a final substantive question. Part II focuses on the effect of the polarization of partisan elites on policy preferences and electoral choices of the public. Part III concentrates on political participation in the form of electoral turnout. The analysis of Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner hooks

together these two concerns, investigating what effect, if any, the polarization of partisan elites has had, not on the preferences of ordinary citizens but on their behavior.

In responding to this question, since Zaller worked out his theory of public opinion,³² most follow the now well-trodden route—to demonstrate the extent to which responsiveness to elite signals is conditional on political sophistication. The more politically aware and attentive are more responsive to elite cues. Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner, however, go off the beaten path, bringing out the extent to which responsiveness to partisan elites is conditional on the *structure* of policy preferences.

As we have noted, preferences across the array of policies that the parties now contest form a two-dimensional pattern. One dimension, the so-called social welfare agenda, consists of preferences on the extent to which (and to a lesser extent, the ways in which) government should intervene to assist those who are disadvantaged. The other dimension, the so-called traditional values agenda, consists of policy preferences on highly charged issues like abortion and gay rights. At the level of elite politics, these two dimensions reduce to one overall liberalism-conservatism dimension.³³ At the level of the electorate as a whole, they tend to be orthogonal.

Carmines and his colleagues take advantage of this orthogonality in a theoretically ingenious way. Their hypothesis, roughly, is that voters who share the outlook of their party are the most responsive to the polarization of partisan elites, and therefore the most likely to take a more active role in party politics as the ideological clash between the parties has intensified. We say that this is, roughly, their hypothesis, because they are among the first to get theoretical leverage out of the discrepancy between the one-dimensional structure of elite policy preferences and the two-dimensional structure of voters' policy preferences. Just so far as elite policy preferences are unidimensional, those who are conservative (liberal) on the social welfare dimension will be conservative (liberal) on the traditional values agenda. Call this pattern—conservative-conservative, liberal-liberal—the elite template. In contrast, just so far as the two policy agendas are orthogonal in the electorate as a whole, the off-diagonals—as well as the main diagonal—will be densely populated. Trading on this, Carmines and colleagues come up with an elegantly simple prediction: citizens who have moved from the off-diagonals to the main diagonal—that is, brought their positions into conformity with the template of party elites—will show an increase in participation. Those who remain on the off-diagonals, as well as those already on the main diagonal, have no new stimulus to increased participation. And so Carmines, Ensley, and Wagner find, not with respect to the vote, not surprisingly since voting tends to be a routinized affair, but with respect to more ego-involving

forms of participation, among them, attending a rally or trying to influence others' votes.

A Codicil

When soliciting and organizing the studies for this volume, we had two goals in mind. First, we wanted each study to stand, on its own, interesting in its own right, providing new insight into the study of mass American politics. Second—and more important—we have aimed at assembling a collection of studies that, taken together, yields a portrait of how citizens face the challenges of democracy. Although we are far from supposing that the case against skepticism has been won, we are of the view that the contributions to the volume make a case for agnosticism.

Notes

1. The definitive work on the topic remains Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). The title of Shenkman's (2008) recent book—*Just How Stupid Are We? Facing the Truth about the American Voter*—bluntly conveys the point.

2. The early Columbia studies (Lazarsfeld et al. 1948; Berelson et al. 1954) of voting behavior laid the empirical foundation for Converse's (1964) seminal work from which most research in this vein follows. Some noteworthy recent studies include Bartels (2005); Todorov et al. (2005); and Achen and Bartels (2006). Kuklinski and his collaborators do an excellent job of synthesizing the research on how the way in which citizens process information often leads them astray (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, 2001; Kuklinski and Peyton 2007).

3. Downs (1957).

4. See, for example, Popkin (1991); Lupia (1994); Lupia and McCubbins (1998); and Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin (2000).

5. V. O. Key famously made this argument. It subsequently became the premise in a radically new approach to the study of mass opinion, elections, and public policy, *The Macro Polity* (Erikson et al. 2002).

6. Campbell (1963).

7. The two canonical expressions of this perspective are Converse (1964) and Zaller (1992), though it is worth remarking that ideology, the most broad-gauged consistency construct in political analysis, is at the center of the second part of Zaller's analysis.

8. Kedar (2005, 2010).

9. Page with Bouton (2006).

10. Page and Shapiro (1992).

11. Page and Shapiro (1992), p. 1.

12. Page and Xie, this volume.

13. Page and Xie, this volume.

14. Appiah (2006).
15. The other principal current of research—that racial politics has become to a large degree part of the long-standing conflict between liberalism and conservatism—is one that one of us is associated with. So we shall only note it, not comment on it.
16. Mutz and Dilliplane, this volume.
17. Ellis and Stimson, this volume.
18. Why do we say strikingly original? Because, until their analysis, the contradiction between symbolic and operational ideologies had been simply written off as yet one more illustration of the muddled thinking of ordinary citizens.
19. Ellis and Stimson, this volume.
20. Levendusky (2009).
21. See the ongoing debate between Fiorina and Abramowitz, most recently Fiorina et al. (2008) and Abramowitz and Saunders (2008).
22. Jacobson, this volume.
23. Among the best recent studies are Ansolabehere et al. (2008) and Layman and Carsey (2002).
24. Krasno, this volume.
25. See especially Bartels (2000).
26. Fiorina and his collaborators have developed the idea of sorting extensively. A recent summary of their claims is Fiorina and Abrams (2008). See also Levendusky (2009).
27. Keith et al. (1977, 1986, 1992).
28. “Interview with John Kenneth Galbraith,” *California Monthly*, February 1986, p. 11.
29. Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978); Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980); Highton and Wolfinger (2001).
30. The highest quality data sets are the Current Population Surveys, which do not ask about political attitudes as a matter of law.
31. Rosenstone and Wolfinger (1978); Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980).
32. Zaller (1992).
33. The most extensive work is that of McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal 1997, 2006).