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### Democratic Discussion

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#### Publication Information & Recommended Citation

Herzog, Don and Donald R. Kinder. "Democratic Discussion." In *Reconsidering the Democratic Public*, edited by George E. Marcus and Russell L. Hanson, 347-377. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1993.

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*Reconsidering  
the  
Democratic Public*

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*Edited by  
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and  
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*The Pennsylvania State University Press  
University Park, Pennsylvania*

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Reconsidering the democratic public / edited by George E. Marcus and  
Russell L. Hanson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-271-00917-9. — ISBN 0-271-00927-6 (pbk.)

1. Democracy.
2. United States—Politics and government.
3. Political participation. I. Marcus, George E.  
II. Hanson, Russell L.

JC433.R317 1993

321.8—dc20

92-33653

CIP

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Printed in the United States of America

Published by The Pennsylvania State University Press,  
Suite C, Barbara Building, University Park, PA 16802-1003

It is the policy of The Pennsylvania State University Press to use acid-free paper for the first printing of all clothbound books. Publications on uncoated stock satisfy the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1984.

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*Democratic Discussion*

*Donald R. Kinder*  
*Don Herzog*

“Democracy,” remarked H. L. Mencken, “is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.” Mencken found American politics a droll spectacle and showered contempt on the dullards he named “the booboisie.” Plenty of other intelligent and perceptive observers have concluded that ordinary citizens are flatly incapable of shouldering the burdens of democracy. Uninformed and uninterested, absorbed in the pressing business of private life, unable to trace out the consequences of political action, citizens possess neither the skills nor the resources required for what Walter Bagehot pithily named “government by discussion.”

We thank Judith Ottmar for impeccable help in preparing the manuscript and Janet Weiss for good advice.

In this light, democratic theorists might appear hopelessly naive or romantic, bent on promoting a politics we haven't seen yet, and likely never will. We want here to take the challenge of antidemocratic thought seriously, particularly on the question of the intelligence of democratic discussion. Our aim is to assess the quality of the political conversations that go on between the American public and American leaders. Our special interest is in what citizens have to say, both to each other and to their elected representatives. But assessing the quality of such discussions requires an assessment not only of the skills and interests of citizens but of the political environment in which citizens find themselves: the "opportunities for political learning" and the "quality of political information" (Page and Shapiro 1988, 13) that are made available to them. And we want to evaluate both where we are now and where we might be in the future, not in some utopian and unrealizable rendition of American society, but in a foreseeable one. We begin by summarizing Mill's vision of democracy, which accords discussion a central place. Next we review the attack on the possibility of democratic discussion implicitly mounted in recent American survey research, especially as set out in the authoritative and influential writings of Philip Converse. Then, in the heart of the chapter, we examine several different lines of argument and evidence that offer the possibility of modifying Converse's melancholy conclusions. Democratic discussion may be more than just a romantic dream. We needn't be breathless and starry-eyed—determined "to see some blue sky in the midst of clouds of disillusioning facts" (Schumpeter 1942, 256)—to resist the thesis that voters are invincibly ignorant.<sup>1</sup>

### *Mill's Vision of Democracy*

John Stuart Mill would have had no patience for any economistic concept of democracy as a system of preference aggregation; nor for that matter would he have relished any pluralistic conception focusing on the struggles among interest groups.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Mill placed debate over the

1. We are deliberately vague about exactly what kind of discussion we have in mind. For an argument that genuine democratic discussion should follow the form of testimony, not deliberation, see Sanders, n.d.

2. This isn't the place for laborious textual exegesis, so we will present a bald summary account of Mill's conception of democracy, drawn from the *Considerations on Representative Government*, *On Liberty*, and some of the journalism.

common good at the heart of democracy. Even majority rule, often thought to be a signally important feature of democracy, faded into the background in his treatment. The majority's vote is important not because it has any right to rule but because it's our best way of seeing what seems the most reasonable view at the moment:

Unless opinions favourable to democracy and to aristocracy, to property and to equality, to co-operation and to competition, to luxury and to abstinence, to sociality and individuality, to liberty and discipline, and all the other standing antagonisms of practical life, are expressed with equal freedom, and enforced and defended with equal talent and energy, there is no chance of both elements obtaining their due; one scale is sure to go up, and the other down. Truth, in the great practical concerns of life, is so much a question of the reconciling and combining of opposites, that very few have minds sufficiently capacious and impartial to make the adjustment with an approach to correctness, and it has to be made by the rough process of a struggle between combatants fighting under hostile banners. (Mill [1859] 1951b, 28)

The more wide-ranging, the more vibrant, the more well-informed the debate, the better. Only in a richly diverse debate can we have any confidence that emerging views have any rational warrant. That's one reason Mill struggled in and out of Parliament to extend the franchise to workers and women (a campaign giving him a reputation as a crazy radical). Members of Parliament, he urged, could talk all day about the interests of the working class, but they'd never really understand those interests until workers themselves could present them. (Mill had other reasons for extending the franchise, chief among them the pregnant thought that being a citizen, not a subject, is partly constitutive of dignity and equality. However important elsewhere, though, these themes don't cut directly into our topic.)

Critics of liberal democracy have often savaged it as mindless chatter and celebrated instead the cult of action, the heroic leader who firmly grasps what needs to be done. Mill's theory explains why we should want there to be endless talk, in and out of the legislature, and especially between legislators and citizens. We simply can't grasp what might be worth doing and why—we can't learn from our previous mistakes and seek to correct them—without that talk:

There must be discussion, to show how experience is to be interpreted. Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument: but facts and arguments, to produce any effect on the mind, must be brought before it. Very few facts are able to tell their own story, without comments to bring out their meaning. The whole strength and value, then, of human judgement, depending on the one property, that it can be set right when it is wrong, reliance can be placed on it only when the means of setting it right are kept constantly at hand. (Mill [1859] 1951b, 27)

For other theories of democracy, all that talk poses an explanatory mystery. We needn't talk a lot to register our preferences or to estimate the pressure of competing interest groups. Economists should explain why we don't literally auction off legislation. Pluralists should explain why legislators don't play tug of war in the chamber, why lobbyists don't hire sumo wrestlers to compete on the floor.

The more talk, the more intelligent the talk, the better. Mill here offers an exhilarating contrast to Rousseau, who, weirdly, is still routinely embraced by self-styled ardent democrats. Rousseau's citizens are zealots, enthusiasts for politics who fly to the public assembly. But when they get there, what do they do? Apparently, they participate in a largely silent ritual of communal affirmation. Long debates, Rousseau warns portentously, are a sign of decline in the state, and he adds proudly that his citizens are too stupid to fall for clever and deceptive arguments. Democracy is a capacious enough concept or tradition to include Rousseau, but we see no reason to embrace his vision as any kind of ideal.

No doubt there are important failings in Mill's views. Mill wanted to rig the popular discussion by giving the intelligent plural votes; worse yet, he was willing to entertain taking occupation and wealth as proxies for intelligence. He thought the popularly elected legislature shouldn't be in the business of actually drafting legislation but should tell some career experts what sort of bill they wanted. He tended to underplay the hustle and bustle and crass manipulation of democratic politics, casting it instead as a bloodless debate among intellectually scrupulous citizens bent on getting the right answer. Most important, perhaps, Mill's quasi-utilitarianism sometimes led him to think that political questions are just

complicated technical questions, that there's a correct answer to the question what policy would maximize the greatest happiness.

These are genuine defects, and we have no interest in whitewashing Mill. Still, the insight that democracy is government by discussion remains attractive even after we scrap Mill's errors. As Mill knew full well, however, there are lots of prerequisites to fruitful discussion. If democratic debate is to go well, what has to be true?

### *Converse and the Improbability of Discussion*

Democratic discussion might seem to require what Walter Lippmann (1922) once called the "omnicompetent citizen," who is attentive to and informed about the persons and problems that animate public life, familiar with the policies and philosophies that divide rival parties and candidates, and in possession of coherent and wide-ranging ideas about government and society. If so, government by discussion is in deep trouble. For it was the omnicompetent citizen that Philip Converse (1964) effectively demolished in his celebrated essay "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics."

Converse did the job with evidence. Based on a detailed analysis of national surveys carried out in 1956, 1958, and 1960, Converse concluded that qualitative, perhaps unbridgeable differences distinguished the political thinking of elites from the political thinking of ordinary citizens. Imagine a triangle, with elites occupying the apex and the vast majority of citizens crowding into the base. As one descends from the pinnacle of American society to the all too ordinary depths, two striking transformations take place in political comprehension, according to Converse:

First, the contextual grasp of "standard" political belief systems fades out very rapidly, almost before one has passed beyond the 10% of the American population that in the 1950s had completed standard college training. Increasingly, simpler forms of information about "what goes with what" (or even information about the simple identity of objects) turn up missing. The net result, as one moves downward, is that constraint declines across the universe of idea-elements, and that the range of relevant belief



systems becomes narrower and narrower. Instead of a few wide-ranging belief systems that organize large amounts of specific information, one would expect to find a proliferation of clusters of ideas among which little constraint is felt, even, quite often, in instances of sheer logical constraint.

[Second,] the character of the objects that are central in a belief system undergoes systematic change. These objects shift from the remote, generic, and abstract to the increasingly simple, concrete, or “close to home.” Where potential political objects are concerned, this progression tends to be from abstract “ideological” principles to the more obviously recognizable social groupings or charismatic leaders and finally to such objects of immediate experience as family, job, and immediate associates. (1964, 213)

Together, these two changes pose a challenge to the very possibility of democratic discussion. They suggest not only that leaders and citizens think about public life in fundamentally different ways, they also question whether citizens are capable of participating in democratic discussion at all. As Converse put it, the fragmentation and concretization of everyday political thinking “are not a pathology limited to a thin and disorganized bottom layer of the *lumpenproletariat*; they are immediately relevant in understanding the bulk of mass political behavior” (213).

Converse came to his gloomy conclusions in part because of Americans’ utter unfamiliarity with standard ideological concepts like liberalism and conservatism. Practically nobody relied on such concepts when they commented on what they liked and disliked about the major parties and candidates. Converse also found that although positions on a variety of pressing domestic and foreign policy issues taken by candidates for the United States House of Representatives revealed clear ideological inclinations, the views expressed by the general public on the same issues did not. Candidates were consistently liberal or conservative; citizens scattered all over the place. Moreover, when citizens were questioned in a series of interviews, their opinions appeared to wobble back and forth randomly, liberal on one occasion, conservative on the next. Some citizens seemed to possess genuine opinions and hold on to them tenaciously, but they appeared to be substantially outnumbered by those who either confessed their ignorance outright or, when nudged, invented a “nonattitude” on the spot (Converse 1970). Nor, finally, did ordinary

Americans seem to know very much about politics. Imposing fractions of the general public do not know whether the Contras were Communist, how William Rehnquist makes a living, who exactly represents them in the United States Senate: the dreary litany goes on and on. In Converse's analysis, "staggering" and "astronomical" differences in knowledge set the leadership echelon apart from the public. "Very little information 'trickles down' very far" (Converse 1964, 212).<sup>3</sup>

All in all, quite an unpretty picture. Most Americans glance at the political world innocent of ideology and information: indifferent to standard ideological concepts, lacking a consistent perspective on public policy, in possession of authentic opinions on only a few policy questions, and knowing precious little. Democratic discussion would seem to be out of reach—and not only here and now. We should keep in mind that Converse's conclusions are directed at an American public that in historical and comparative perspective is remarkably affluent, extraordinarily well educated, and virtually bombarded with news. What, if anything, can we say in response?

### *It Ain't So*

Much of Converse's analysis hangs on the contrast between the actual responses of Americans and the hypothetical responses of a "sophisticated observer." But we can doubt the sophistication of this observer; that is, we can wonder if Americans have to fit this particular preconceived model in order to think intelligently about politics. Converse's sophisticated observer, for instance, would have strong views about whether utilities should be publicly owned or not, but we know of no evidence that this was pressing business on the public agenda in 1958. Citizens absorbed in the question

3. Estimates of political knowledge, which are unrelievedly depressing, no doubt fail to tell the grimmer truth. Even the very best sample surveys—like the National Election Study or the General Social Survey—successfully interview only about 75 percent of the targeted sample. Those who refuse to be questioned, like those who simply are never contacted in the first place, are unrepresentative of the public as a whole: they fall disproportionately among those totally disengaged from politics. Were we to correct for such selection bias, we would discover that the American public is even less well informed than the reported figures suggest (Brehm 1989).

might well have struck their friends and neighbors as quaint. More generally, citizens who proceeded in the way recommended by Converse's sophisticated observer could be described not as informed and intelligent but as single-minded and doctrinaire.

Converse emphasizes the advantages of ideology and therefore laments its absence. From his perspective, an ideological framework provides the citizen with a deeper, richer understanding of politics than is available through other means. In part this longing for ideology reflects Converse's disdain for these "other means": remember that to Converse, the bulk of the American public thinks about public life in ways that should be regarded as *pathological*. But more than that, Converse believes that ideological frameworks provide an economical and useful way for citizens to make sense of the "swarming confusion of problems" (Lippmann 1925) that constitutes the world of politics. To the ideologically inclined, "new political events have more meaning, retention of political information from the past is far more adequate, and political behavior increasingly approximates that of sophisticated 'rational' models" (Converse 1964, 227).

But as a mode of thinking, ideology also has its disadvantages. Robert Lane (1973), Converse's most persistent critic over the years, worries in particular that ideological thinking is not only economical but also dogmatic and intolerant: "Reference to an ideological posture would not only 'constrain' policy thinking but would confine it. There are meanings of the term *ideology* that suggest defensive postures (Rokeach 1960) such that the main objective of ideological policy thinking is to defend an ideological commitment, not to explore alternative policies" (104). That people don't think the way Converse stipulated they should doesn't necessarily show there's anything wrong with people. It might just show there was something wrong, or at least incomplete, about Converse's specifications (more on this later).

The most devastating element in Converse's original indictment, however, is the nonattitude thesis, the claim that few citizens possess real views on pressing matters of public policy. Because the nonattitude result presupposes nothing about what counts as a valid structure or approach in political deliberation, it would seem to make serious trouble for the wide-ranging discussion that democracy requires.

Fortunately for the prospects of democratic discussion, the nonattitude thesis now seems less persuasive, in light of empirical work of two sorts that has followed in Converse's wake. In the first place, unstable opinions, we now know, are a reflection not only of vague and confused

citizens, as Converse would have it, but of vague and confused *questions*, as well; instability is, in part, a product of the very imperfect way survey questions are put to citizens (Achen 1975; Erikson 1979; Brody 1986; and for a review of the evidence, Smith 1984). Second, the political events of the last twenty-five years have made clear that issue publics need not be confined to minuscule fractions of the public as a whole. Most Americans developed real attitudes toward racial busing, capital punishment, abortion, the war in Vietnam, affirmative action, and more (see, e.g., Converse and Markus 1979; Kinder and Rhodebeck 1982; Luker 1984). When policy issues become entangled with moral, racial, religious, and nationalist loyalties, the nonattitude problem appears much less problematic.

These developments leave us somewhat more confident in the public's capacity to develop genuine political commitments than where Converse left things a quarter century ago. Still, what we have said so far does no damage to the contention that Americans know astonishingly little about the political world that whirls around them. Perhaps democratic discussion doesn't require that citizens know more (see below), but nothing we have said to this point gets around the finding of profound and widespread ignorance.

### *It Ain't Necessarily So*

Converse clearly understood himself as uncovering not a particular historical contingency but something deeply essential: thus tags like "the nature" of mass publics, and thus his relishing similar findings from France (Converse and Pierce 1986). Now, forty million Frenchmen may be wrong—they may even be empty-headed—but it doesn't follow that all "mass publics" everywhere, even counterfactual mass publics, are or would be wrong and empty-headed.

Like Converse, Lippmann thought his findings depended on nothing but some elementary considerations of psychology. In *The Public and Its Problems* (1927), a veiled response to this part of Lippmann's case, John Dewey suggested that instead of seeing human nature as the cause of political ignorance we should see contingent social practices. Change the practices, and people would become intelligent, acute, incisive.<sup>4</sup>

4. This, we suggest, is one thrust of some rather murky Hegelian passages about the public coming to know itself.

Typically allergic to thinking of psychological predicates as irreducibly “in the head,” Dewey emphasized instead the sociological nature of intelligence. The ancient Greeks did a wretched job of economic calculation; we do a surpassingly good job. What explains the difference? Not, surely, that we’re brighter than they were. It’s that we have a series of social practices and conceptual tools available to us that they didn’t have: we have markets, double-entry bookkeeping, the idea of capital depreciation, and the like. Or again: Mark Twain’s Connecticut Yankee amazes the gawking yokels of King Arthur’s Court, not because he is smarter, but because modern science and technology enable him to do things they can’t do.

In a Deweyan view, then, we’re not necessarily stuck with the bleak findings of Lippmann and Converse. Change the world, reform our practices, and we can improve the intelligence of citizens. Dewey’s argument is the right context for considering the cascade of leftist indictments and reforms offered in recent years. American “democracy,” we’ve been told, is nothing but a spectator sport, a beauty contest, in which voters are systematically distracted from genuinely pressing issues of public policy and fed stupid television advertisements, canned “debates” guaranteeing no real confrontation of competing views, and so on. Or again: a capitalist workplace, a consumerist culture, and the rest explain why the working-class men of Eastport interviewed at length by Robert Lane (1962) were so concerned with buying and selling, so little concerned with social justice and elections. Such critics of liberal democracy as Benjamin Barber (1984) and Joshua Cohen and Joel Rogers (1983) have plenty of antecedents—among them, we note, John Stuart Mill, who himself urged at length that the modern workplace ought to be run democratically and who pressed for unbelievably low spending limits on campaigns.

When Lippmann tells us that politics looms awfully remote on the horizon of the ordinary citizen, he must be talking about social distance, not physical distance. But social distance depends in part on personal identity. Because they identify with Israel, many American Jews know and care a lot about Israeli politics, which (short of intercontinental flights) they can’t even participate in. It’s flatly implausible to view personal identity as any kind of brute fact: it too depends on contingent social practices, cultural norms, and the like. Americans could think of themselves as citizens concerned with politics; if they did in part have that identity, political issues would no longer be far away.

Remember that we want to keep the counterfactuals reasonably close to the actual world. Some critics of American democracy seem to take perverse pride in insisting that only heroically radical changes could make America truly democratic. One could dispute their programs on the merits, of course, but one could also note that those radical changes just don't seem to be in the cards, not now anyway. We prefer to think about available changes in the name of making America more democratic, even if not fully and ideally democratic according to someone's stern standards.<sup>5</sup> So, for instance, changes in journalism might not have the dramatic implications some attribute to democratic socialism, but those changes are still worth pursuing. If this counts as bourgeois reformism, we are happy to plead guilty.

And if appeals to counterfactual worlds seem unscientifically speculative, consider two real examples pointing in the same direction. In 1964, Senator Goldwater spoke forcefully against the intrusions of national government and for states' rights, making no secret of his staunch opposition to the Civil Rights Act. In this respect, Goldwater was unusual: on matters of policy, American presidential candidates typically seek the safety of ambiguity (Page 1978). When they do not, when they offer clear and distinctive proposals, public confusion and ignorance can diminish, sometimes precipitously. By election day in 1964, more than three quarters of the public claimed some familiarity with the Civil Rights Act, and of those, practically everyone knew that Goldwater opposed the act and that Johnson favored it (RePass 1971). These are extraordinary figures: public perceptions are seldom so clear, and the electoral hazards of clarity—Goldwater *was* slaughtered—have not been lost on the consultants and pollsters who seem increasingly to be in charge of campaigns (and administrations) these days. Still, it is worth keeping in mind that if candidates can be coaxed (or compelled) into presenting their differences, a significant fraction of the public seems capable of appreciating them.

A second example concerns public understanding of congressional candidates, who, compared to their colleagues competing for the presidency, toil for the most part in utter darkness. Immediately following midterm elections, for example, fewer than one in four Americans can recall something about the major party candidates that have just run for the House in their district (Pierce and Converse 1981). That's the way

5. Keeping in mind that what counts as an available change is in part up for political grabs.

things usually are. But every now and then, things can be quite different. A case in point is the 1958 campaign in the Fifth District of Arkansas. There the incumbent representative had become entangled in the federal government's effort to resolve the Little Rock school desegregation crisis. Hardly an integrationist, the incumbent was nevertheless effectively portrayed as soft on civil rights and was defeated in a write-in campaign by a local hero of Southern resistance. In the Fifth District in 1958, *every* voter claimed to know *both* candidates (Miller and Stokes 1966).

Thus, the melancholy indictment of the American public as "wretchedly informed" need not hold always, everywhere. Whatever hurdles stand in the way of informing the public can be overcome, given the right set of circumstances. Of course, the right set of circumstances may not come along very often. And what voters do with the information once it is in their possession is another matter. In the Fifth District in 1958, they swept a racist into office. This is democracy at work, a discussion (we can presume) really took place, the people got what they wanted (i.e., those who were eligible to vote, in part because of the pale color of their skin). Somehow, though, it is an episode hard to celebrate. Discussion is a necessary but insufficient condition for democratic practice.

What about the claim of ideological innocence, which we regard as a less serious liability for democratic discussion? Many critics argued that Converse's conclusions ignored politics, that his analysis paid too little attention to the nature of campaigns and public debate. According to this line of criticism, the quality and sophistication of citizens' understanding of politics mirrors the quality and sophistication of the public debate that they witness. Furnish Americans with a conspicuously ideological politics, and they are perfectly capable of responding in kind.

Certainly the critics have had time on their side. Surely Converse's conclusions reflected in part the comparatively tranquil Eisenhower years, a period of political recovery from the intense ideological debates of the New Deal and from the collective trauma of the Great Depression and world war. Surely the original claim must be modified given the events that have shattered national tranquillity since.

The short answer is no. The long answer is long and complicated, and we have neither the time nor the heart to plow through all the details (for the details, see Kinder 1983; Luskin 1987; Smith 1989). Suffice it to say here that Converse's original claim of ideological innocence stands

up reasonably well, both to detailed reanalysis and to political change. Indeed, in some respects, the claim is strengthened. *Despite* the boisterous events, panoramic changes, and ideological debates that have punctuated American politics over the last quarter century, most citizens continue to be mystified by or at least indifferent to standard ideological terminology; most continue, as Lane put it, to “morselize” the items and fragments of political life (Lane 1962, 353). We turn, then, to another question. Does ideological innocence preclude rational democratic discussion? Or is there room for rationality even if we concede the lion’s share of Converse’s case?

### *Enough Already About Ideology*

The great debate over ideology, which took over the study of American public opinion over the last twenty-five years, has taught us more about how Americans *do not* think about politics than about how they *do*. This is a lesson of basic importance for our understanding of public opinion, and one with real practical application. It leads us, for example, to doubt sweeping claims about the American public’s embrace of liberalism in the 1960s or the public’s supposedly sharp movement to the right during the Reagan years. Detailed and careful investigations reveal, as we would expect, that public opinion actually moved in various ideological directions at once (Gold 1992; Schuman et al. 1985). Although ideological innocence is an important conclusion (especially in light of newly elected leaders’ persistence in claiming an ideological mandate), it does not tell us anything in detail about how Americans do in fact participate in democratic discussion.

From this vantage point, a welcome recent development in the study of public opinion has been the investigation of foundations for political belief other than ideology. In the absence of ideological principles, perhaps everyday thinking about politics is determined by the pursuit of self-interest or by the perception of group conflict or by various prejudices and solidarities or by the values Americans embrace, the belief in equality or individualism or limited government. Much of this research follows directly in Converse’s footsteps, in the sense that the proper subject of investigation is taken to be the nature of belief systems as a whole. The difference, of course, is that in place of ideology is substi-



tuted some other “master idea”—individualism, say. Another and complementary line of empirical analysis attempts to understand public opinion not in general terms but in a particular domain, on a particular topic. By abandoning an analysis of belief *systems*, this approach is necessarily less panoramic and sweeping than the analysis Converse provided. Such work includes research on Americans’ willingness to extend political rights to groups they despise (Sullivan et al. 1982), on the American public’s view toward relations with the Soviet Union (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987), and on Americans’ reactions to affirmative action policies (Kinder and Sanders 1987, 1990). In each of these quite different cases, empirical work has been able to uncover a solid foundation for opinion. The discovery here is not of nonattitudes but of real attitudes, reasonably structured and well embedded in a set of relevant considerations. Public opinion on affirmative action, for example, appears to reflect in systematic ways views on equality and individualism, the expected consequences of affirmative action for family and group, and strongly felt prejudice against affirmative action’s intended beneficiaries. Such findings go some distance toward relieving the gloominess that surrounded Converse’s original conclusion.

But if public opinion is more intelligible and better structured than Converse’s analysis implied, some of the considerations that provide the intelligibility and structure are deplorable. For example, political intolerance has its roots in personal distress and insecurity—in the “psychological burdens of freedom,” as Lane (1962) put it. For example, the American public’s view toward the Soviet Union was powerfully conditioned by an informationally impoverished response to the symbol of Communism. An important ingredient in whites’ opposition to affirmative action programs, probably the most important, is racial prejudice. That public opinion is real does not make it, or the democratic form of government that it shapes, necessarily laudable.

Furthermore, the view of public opinion that we are promoting here—public opinion as a systematic reflection of interests, social attachments and hatreds, and American values—carries with it two potential problems for democratic discussion. First is the problem of *diversity*. Virtually all the empirical results on public opinion assume and address that most hypothetical of creatures, “the average American.” Research on political tolerance, like research on U.S.-Soviet relations or on affirmative action, tells just one story, with a single protagonist. This inclination in public opinion research to treat Americans as if they were homoge-

neous and interchangeable, which is of great statistical convenience, should be resisted. Average results may be quite misleading, disguising “population heterogeneity in much the same way census averages describing the ‘average’ family as having 2.5 children do: one has trouble finding an average family” (Rivers 1988).

Whether diversity is taken into account in research or, as is more often the case, obliterated, the sheer fact of diversity could spell trouble for democratic discussion. If Americans turned out to be vastly different from one another in ways that were consequential for how they arrived at their views on public issues, then democratic discussion might prove impossible. At the extreme, each of us would possess a private language of politics. We might all be speaking to the same topic—whether government restrictions on abortion should be tightened or relaxed, say—but in ways that our fellow citizens would find quite incomprehensible.

This goes too far. Americans are amazingly diverse, but not all differences count for politics. If this were the case, our “average” results would not be as systematic or powerful as they are. Such results are incompatible with the strong version of diversity: namely, that the American public consists of millions of individual citizens, each operating off an idiosyncratic logic. Moreover, those (regrettably few) studies that have directly investigated the possibility that different kinds of Americans come to their views on politics in fundamentally different ways, often conclude that they do not. Differences marked by education or information or social class or ideas about how the economy works generally do not require a proliferation of qualitatively different models of public opinion. This line of research typically uncovers differences of degree, not kind (see, e.g., Feldman 1982; Stimson 1975; Rivers 1988; Kinder and Mebane 1983; Zaller 1992). Such results, provisional as they are, seem from our angle to be good news: we see no evidence to indicate that diversity precludes democratic discussion.

A companion to the problem of diversity is the problem of *complexity*. If, as we maintain, public opinion is structured by a complex amalgam of interests, attachments, hatreds, and values, is democratic conversation impossible? Does such complexity mean that elites and masses are doomed to talk past each other, the former employing an ideological vocabulary destined to sail past the latter?

Not necessarily. Consider the work of Gamson and his colleagues (Gamson and Lasch 1983; Gamson and Modigliani 1987) on the concept

of frame, which holds out both a promise and a threat to democratic conversation. In their account of the public discourse that surrounds political issues, Gamson and Modigliani (1987, 143) portray a frame as “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them. The frame suggests what the controversy is about, the essence of the issue.” Frames consist of metaphors, exemplars, catchphrases, depictions, and visual images; they often include a rudimentary causal analysis and appeals to honored principles. We believe that frames lead a double life: that they are structures of the mind that impose order and meaning on the problems of society and that they are interpretive structures embedded in political discourse (Kinder and Sanders 1990). At both levels, frames provide narrations for social problems. Frames tell stories about how problems come to be and what (if anything) needs to be done about them.

The good news here is that frames appear to provide a common vocabulary, one that enables elites and citizens to speak clearly to one another. Take, for example, the controversial issue of affirmative action. Gamson and Modigliani (1987) describe how elites in the United States have framed the debate on affirmative action and how the debate has evolved over the past fifteen years. To identify elite frames, they examined the opinions of Supreme Court justices in pivotal cases, *amicus curiae* briefs, speeches and statements delivered by prominent public officials, and the views expressed in various political journals. Gamson and Modigliani then went on to trace changes in each frame’s prominence from 1969 to 1984 by examining national news magazines, network news programs, editorial cartoons, and syndicated opinion columns. According to Gamson and Modigliani’s analysis, supporters of affirmative action have typically defended their position throughout this period by referring to the need for “remedial action.” Under this frame, race-conscious programs are required to offset the continuing pernicious effects of America’s long history of racial discrimination. On the other side of the issue, opponents of affirmative action began by arguing that affirmative action constituted “unfair advantage.” This frame questions whether rewards should be allocated on the basis of race and expresses the particular concern that blacks are being handed advantages that they do not deserve. Unfair advantage has gradually given way among elite opponents of affirmative action to “reverse discrimination.” Like unfair advantage, reverse discrimination questions whether rewards should be

allocated on the basis of race, but this time by raising the particular concern whether the rights of whites must be sacrificed in order to advance the interests of blacks. The important and in certain respects, uplifting point here is that elite frames are widely comprehensible to mass publics: they were created, in part, with this aim explicitly in mind. Through frames, democratic discussion between leaders and citizens seems quite unproblematic.

On the other hand, the creation of artful frames enhances the possibility for manipulation. By sponsoring and promoting rival opinion frames, political elites may alter how issues are understood and, as a consequence, what opinion turns out to be (Kinder and Sanders 1990). We don't mean to suggest that *either* democratic discussion is bloodless, gentlemanly, and overintellectualized *or else* it's passionate, manipulative, and irrational. The introduction of a symbol, even a deliberately created symbol, doesn't itself show that something has gone wrong. Nor does the presence of passion, even stridency. Symbols and emotions aren't the enemies of cognition, or anyway, they aren't necessarily its enemies. Typically democratic discussion is at once rational and emotional, at once a matter of the manipulations of interest and the sorting out of sensible positions on public policy. And that's fine. Our worry about the nefarious possibilities of framing is just that they can become freewheeling exercises in pure manipulation.

### *Elections as Government by Discussion*

Elections do not a democracy make—not even free, fair, and frequent elections. But we need not repeat Schumpeter's (1942) mistake to insist that elections play a special role in democracy and so deserve special attention here. The campaigns that lead up to election day constitute an opportunity for candidates and parties to make their case to the voters. And on election day itself, voters are provided the opportunity to “talk back.” What can we say here about how voters make up their minds that bears on the quality of democratic conversation?

It should come as no surprise to learn that voting is seldom driven by ideological concerns. This discovery, like the parallel discovery in the study of public opinion, is no ground for democratic despair. Moreover, recent developments in scholarship on voters and elections suggest

several grounds for optimism. We take up three here: the ongoing reassessment of the meaning of party identification, the apparent resurgence of issue-based voting, and the powerful inclination among voters to punish incumbents when things go bad.

*Party identification revisited.* According to *The American Voter*, identification with one of the major parties typically begins in childhood. Such identifications grow stronger but rarely change through the course of adult life. To Campbell et al. (1960), party identification was a standing commitment, a “persistent adherence,” one that lent order and stability to a complicated and ever-changing political world:

To the average person the affairs of government are remote and complex, and yet the average citizen is asked periodically to formulate opinions about these affairs. At the very least he has to decide how he will vote, what choice he will make between candidates offering different programs and very different versions of contemporary political events. In this dilemma, having the party symbol stamped on certain candidates, certain issue positions, certain interpretations of political reality is of great psychological convenience. (Stokes 1966a, 126–27)

This may be convenient for the individual citizen, and it may even mean that democratic discussion is fixed to familiar anchoring points—those provided by the parties. But the preeminence of party identification in the voter’s calculus is also troubling for democratic discussion. Mechanical attachment to a party, formed in childhood, seems on the face of it rather discouraging to democratic prospects. It suggests that insofar as campaigns are discussions, no one is really listening: virtually everyone made up their minds long ago.

But this interpretation of party identification has in recent years been vigorously challenged. The central theme here is that party identification should be regarded not as a standing decision, a residue of childhood learning, but, as Fiorina (1977, 618) put it, a “running balance sheet on the two parties.” As it happens, party identification is not immovable. The loyalty citizens invest in the parties is at least partly conditioned by what the parties *do*. The Democratic and Republican parties are judged by the candidates they nominate (Markus and Converse 1979; Jennings and Markus 1984); the policy proposals they promote (Jackson 1975;

Franklin and Jackson 1983); the peace, prosperity, and domestic tranquillity that they manage to deliver (Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981); and the company they keep, as in the political realignment of the American South over the last quarter century (Grofman et al. 1988). Party identification is not merely a blind attachment left over from childhood; it has real political content; it accommodates history.

We should not press this too far, however. Although party identification does respond to the grand events of the day, it does so sluggishly. A deep and sustained “Democratic recession” may weaken the loyalties of the rank and file, but very few will actually abandon their party and cross over to the other side. In this respect, the metaphor of the running balance sheet is misleading. Party identification remains a durable attachment, one not easily relinquished and one that presumably operates both to curtail democratic discussion and to fix it to familiar anchoring points.

*The possibility of issue-based voting.* Citizens who weigh public policy in their electoral decisions are often commended for their civic responsibility. By supporting candidates whose views on public policy most resemble their own, such citizens supposedly contribute to the formation of policy itself. But according to Converse’s diagnosis, the typical voter seemed ill prepared to make such a contribution. Remember that many citizens confessed to having no opinion on policy questions, and some substantial fraction of those who claimed to have an opinion seemed to do so capriciously. Moreover, as revealed in *The American Voter*, few seemed to know current government policy; many thought the parties did not differ appreciably in the policies they advocated. In light of these results, Campbell et al. (1960) concluded that opinions on specific matters of policy ordinarily play a modest role in presidential elections.

This conclusion provoked a strong reaction. Beginning with V. O. Key’s posthumously published volume, *The Responsible Electorate* (1966), a major preoccupation of research on voting has been to rehabilitate the ordinary citizen by demonstrating that policy voting is in fact more widespread than originally alleged in *The American Voter*. Succinctly put, Key’s argument was that voters were no more foolish than the political choices they confronted; if provided clear alternatives, voters were perfectly capable of being “moved by concern about central and relevant questions of public policy” (1966, 7–8).

And so they are. Clarity about policy differences in the voter's mind does indeed depend on the clarity of the choices available (Pomper 1972). More important, when confronted with real differences, voters take them into account. Policy voting waxes and wanes according to the clarity and aggressiveness with which rival candidates push alternative programs (Nie et al. 1979; Rosenstone 1983).

A clinching demonstration of this point—and its limitations—is provided by Page and Brody's (1972) analysis of the 1968 presidential campaign. They discovered that late in the campaign, opinions on Vietnam policy correlated trivially with voters' comparative assessment of the major party candidates. Page and Brody blamed this result not on voters but on Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon's near total failure to articulate alternative policies for voters to choose between. In contrast, voting in a hypothetical election pitting Eugene McCarthy against George Wallace reflected voters' opinions on Vietnam policy much more faithfully (see also Converse et al. 1969). However—and here is evidence on the limits to policy voting—despite the clarity and extremity of the positions on Vietnam staked out by McCarthy and Wallace, confusion on these matters in the general public was nonetheless widespread. In mid-August, only about two-thirds of the public were able to assign positions to McCarthy and to Wallace, of whom less than one-half placed McCarthy to the left of Wallace. Thus, rival candidates who differ on important matters and say so clearly and conspicuously will certainly encourage policy voting—but many voters will never notice.

*Throwing the rascals out.* This brings us at last to those voters who, when times go bad, seem quite willing to evict incumbents from office. Bad things happen to incumbents who preside over recessions, scandals, international humiliations, domestic turmoil, and the like. Presidents, senators, and governors seeking reelection have much to fear from the voters' inclination to throw the rascals out (see, e.g., Chubb 1988; Fiorina 1981; Kramer 1971; Tufte 1978; Rosenstone 1983).<sup>6</sup>

At first glance, this seems a welcome result: elections become a device, though a crude and retrospective one, for shaping government action.

6. Incumbent members of the U.S. House are another matter. It is not that House incumbents are immune to national tides (see, e.g., Kramer 1971; Tufte 1978); it is that incumbent members of the House, when faced with national tides running against them, can compensate through their ability to monopolize resources and deliver benefits to their district. These days, House incumbents are virtually undefeatable (Jacobson 1987).

Public officials bent on reelection then “have strong incentives to anticipate their constituents’ reactions to the social and economic conditions that result from government actions” (Fiorina 1981, 201). Of course, voters asserting that they don’t like what’s happened during the preceding administration is not the same thing as giving detailed instructions on what the new administration should do. But such imprecision actually has a certain advantage, as Fiorina points out, “It lays no policy constraint on the governing administration; rather, the government is free to innovate, knowing that it will be judged on the results of its actions rather than their specifics. In a word, the accountability generated by a retrospective voting electorate and reaction anticipating politicians provides latitude for political leadership” (Fiorina 1981, 201).

The pervasiveness of this simple reward-punish calculus leaves wide open the important questions how and how *well* voters decide whether a government’s record has been glorious or abysmal or merely ordinary. One possible answer is supplied by the self-interest hypothesis: perhaps voters examine their own circumstances first. Voters motivated by self-interest support candidates and parties that have advanced their own interests and reject candidates and parties that have impeded their own interests. A political calculus based entirely on such private calculations would of course substantially reduce the costs that are normally incurred by becoming informed about the world of politics—costs that Lippmann, Downs, Converse, and many others insist the voter is very reluctant to pay.<sup>7</sup>

The self-interest answer is appealing to many—but not to Mill. Mill would have reviled the “realistic” thought that voters are out to maximize their self-interest. Market rationality isn’t what Mill’s conception requires. The news that voters are out to maximize their self-interest would have struck him as a fatal blow to democratic politics; voters must pursue instead the common good or sound public policy.

Thus, Mill would have welcomed the news that the self-interest hypothesis has fared poorly in a variety of empirical tests. The electoral effects associated with personal economic well-being appear to be quite modest and seem confined for the most part to that usually small

7. Why concede so readily that learning about politics counts as a cost? It’s odd for political scientists, who themselves pore over daily newspapers and the like, to talk—and think—this way. Here again, we would insist on the prior place of identity and social practices; given other attachments, other practices, people might see learning about politics as a calling, not a chore.



minority of voters who see a connection between their own economic predicament and broader economic trends in the country as a whole (e.g., Feldman 1982; Fiorina 1981; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kinder et al. 1989; Lewis-Beck 1988; Sears et al. 1980; Markus 1988).<sup>8</sup>

A second possibility is that voters pay attention not so much to their own problems and achievements when they reach their political decisions as to the problems and achievements of the country—the “sociotropic hypothesis” (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Whereas self-interested voters ask the incumbent, What have you done for *me* lately? sociotropic voters ask, What have you done for the *nation* lately? Voters seem in fact to resemble this sociotropic creature, responding to changes in general economic conditions much more than to changes in the circumstances of personal economic life, in the United States and in Western Europe alike (see, e.g., Feldman 1982; Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kinder et al. 1989; Lewis-Beck 1988).

At one level, the sociotropic result can be construed to mean that some significant portion of the electorate is sensible (perhaps even rational). That is, in making political decisions, citizens tend to rely on information about the economy as a whole, instead of information about their own idiosyncratic experiences. But how well do they do this? Perhaps voters can be bamboozled about the real state of the country. They may know very well what has happened to themselves and their families, but as we’ve seen, such clear-eyed perceptions seem not to matter very much for their political decisions. Assessments of the nation’s vitality do not have the same grounding in everyday experience. Edelman (1988) for one, contends that the public’s beliefs about government success and failure are among the most arbitrary of political constructions: “Assessing governmental performance is not at all like evaluating the plumber by checking whether the faucet still drips. Officials construct tests that show success, just as their opponents construct other tests that show failure. The higher the office the more certain that judgments of performance depend upon efforts to influence interpretations by suggesting which observations are pertinent, which irrelevant, and what both mean” (41). Edelman reminds us that the sociotropic calculus is subject to manipulation and distortion, that there

8. If voters were motivated by self-interest alone, it would of course never occur to them to vote. That millions do so in the face of this strong prediction is a perpetual embarrassment to economic styles of explanation, as Barry (1970) noted many years ago.

is no necessary correspondence between the public's diagnosis and the actual health and vitality of the nation.

That voters are sociotropic is promising: it means they may be capable of shouldering Mill's burden of relegating concern with mere self-interest and thinking about (something like) the common good. But we'd like to know more. Given a more detailed account of sociotropic voting, will Mill's account be adequate? Or (as we suspect) will it need sharpening, recasting, more nuance? Perhaps we should emphasize yet again that it is not appropriate to adjust our normative standards so they fit whatever the facts are. Maybe it will turn out that current sociotropic voters aren't good enough.

### *The Miracle of Aggregation*

If the public is "that miscellaneous collection of a few wise and many foolish individuals," as Mill maintained, the public *as a whole* may behave quite wisely. This can happen in part through the sheer mechanical process of statistical aggregation, the law of large numbers applied to public opinion. Aggregating from individuals to the public as a whole drives out the noisiness that is so visible to analysts of individual opinion. The signal that emerges from the miracle of aggregation, as Converse calls it, may be determined disproportionately by the relative handful of citizens who are paying careful attention. Thus, it is quite possible "to arrive at a highly rational system performance on the backs of voters most of whom are remarkably ill-informed much of the time" (Converse 1990; see also Converse 1975, 135; McKelvey and Ordeshook 1990).

The citizenry may behave wisely, even if made up largely of foolish citizens, also because of what Page and Shapiro call *social aggregation*, a phrase that is meant to point to the division of political labor in society:

Experts and researchers and government officials learn new things about the political world. They make discoveries and analyze and interpret new events. These analysts pass along their ideas and interpretations to commentators and other opinion leaders, who in turn communicate with the general public directly through newspapers, magazines, and television and indirectly through

social networks of families, friends, and coworkers. Members of the public think and talk among themselves and often talk back to elites, questioning, criticizing, and selecting ideas that are useful. Most citizens never acquire much detailed information about politics, but they do pay attention to and think about media reports and friends' accounts of what commentators, officials, and trusted experts are saying the government should do. And they tend to form and change their policy preferences accordingly.

As a result, new information and ideas can affect collective public opinion even when most members of the public have no detailed knowledge of them. Even when most individuals are ill informed, collective public opinion can react fully and sensibly to events, ideas, or discoveries. (this volume, 42)

If this seems Panglossian, it is. Are experts and officials really so determined to turn up the "truth"? Is it reasonable to assume that most members of the public who know so little nevertheless hang on the words of friends for advice about what the government should do? Even in a society featuring an efficient division of political labor, can the public really be expected to react *fully* to new information? Well, no.

Still, statistical and social aggregation together can work wonders. A particularly illuminating illustration of this can be found in research devoted to explaining fluctuations in public support for the president. This is an important topic, not least because popular support is a vital political resource, perhaps the president's single most important base of power (Neustadt 1960; Rivers and Rose 1985; Ostrom and Simon 1985). We now know that a president's support depends upon the prevailing economic, social, and political conditions of the times. Unemployment, inflation, economic growth, flagrant violations of public trust, the human toll of war, international crises, dramatic displays of presidential authority—all these affect the president's standing in the public at large (Hibbs et al. 1982a, 1982b; Kernell 1978; MacKuen 1983; Ostrom and Simon 1985). These results suggest a certain reasonableness of public opinion *in the aggregate* to conspicuous events on the national and international stage.

Much the same conclusion emerges from the study of elections. Although the typical voter seems ill informed, the typical *electorate* seems to behave as if it were well informed. For example, Feld and

Grofman (1988) have shown that the electorate can express preferences among candidates exactly congruent with an ideological ordering, despite the fact that a large fraction of the voters who constitute the electorate express preferences that are ideologically incoherent. This result—ideological consistency as a collective phenomenon, a kind of Arrow’s paradox running in the opposite direction—may hold not only for the electorate as a whole but for most major social groups as well. Feld and Grofman argue that “it is a ‘fallacy of composition’ to believe that collective decision making will be ideological *only* when all or most members of the collectivity, as individuals, are ideological” (774).

Change in electoral outcomes from one contest to the next—again, an aggregate phenomenon—displays the same kind of coherence. Such change seems provoked primarily by the emergence of new candidates and by alterations in national circumstances (see, e.g., Stokes 1966b; Popkin et al. 1976; Rosenstone 1983; Markus 1988; Kramer 1971). The overriding point for our purposes is that electoral change appears to be both intelligible—see especially Rosenstone’s (1983) model’s ability to *predict* presidential election outcomes months before they happen—and sensible. Voters in the aggregate behave as though a real discussion had taken place.<sup>9</sup>

The results on presidential popularity and on election outcome are quite representative of the empirical returns from a wide range of inquiry into the dynamics of public opinion taken as a collectivity. During the last fifteen years, there has been an explosion of research of this sort: on the American public’s attachment to political parties (Converse 1976), support for racial integration (Schuman et al. 1985), opposition to war (Mueller 1973), support for government policy (Page and Shapiro 1988), assessments of the national economy (Markus and Kinder 1988), and more. A very general conclusion across such investigations is how finely responsive public opinion is to social, economic, and political change. Viewed from this vantage point, public opinion looks extremely sensible, reasonable, perhaps even rational (Page and Shapiro 1989).

The construction of a rational public in this fashion is certainly possible, but not foolproof. The claim for aggregation has an illustrious

9. This kind of intelligibility, we grant, can also be taken as a threat to democratic debate. For it can be (mis-?)read as suggesting that campaigns make no difference, that all that talk is surface blather, obscuring our view of the deep causal mechanisms, like economic growth, that really drive election outcomes.

history: roughly parallel arguments litter the history of political thought. The miracle of aggregation is reminiscent of Condorcet's jury theorem. It may well be what Rousseau had in mind in a notoriously obscure passage in *The Social Contract* about the pluses and minuses canceling out in voting. And it must be what Madison was hoping for in thinking that after public opinion was refined and filtered by large districts, indirect elections, and the like, republican devotion to the common good would outweigh the din of faction.

Like their modern counterparts, these arguments are tempting, but they're all a bit too convenient. Put in terms of signal and noise, the essential problem is that the noise we want to drown out may not be random; it may instead be systematic, structured by cynical television advertisements, appeals to racism, and the like. There's no reason a priori to expect that these various forces will neatly cancel themselves out. In fact, the noise may add up to a tightly unified signal that will drown the signal we're interested in. It is—no surprise here—an empirical question how often aggregation produces miracles. Perhaps the answer is frequently. But it is wise to remember that aggregation is no magical mechanism that somehow guarantees systematic rationality on the backs of ignorant and confused voters.

### *Blue Sky and Clouds of Disillusioning Facts*

"Democracy," wrote Mencken, "is the art and science of running the circus from the monkey-cage." Or, for those who like their theory formal, "If  $x$  is the population of the United States and  $y$  is the degree of imbecility of the average American, then democracy is the theory that  $x \times y$  is less than  $y$ ." Such sentiments tempt not just cynics but those anguished by the undeniable shortcomings of the American citizen—and of American politics. But are they justified?

Not completely. Granted, there is much that Americans just flatly don't know about politics, and their ignorance does indeed threaten the very possibility of government by discussion. The bleak results of Converse and others can't be lightly dismissed. But as we've discovered here, citizens are capable of expressing real opinions on government policy, opinions that are systematically rooted in their interests, social attachments, and political values. Citizens sometimes think sensibly

about politics, and in the right context, they can learn quite a bit, quite rapidly, about the candidates who compete for their support. Broadly speaking, many voters seem to behave in reasonable ways, given the discourse and choices they are presented: they reassess their attachments to party in light of political, economic, and social change; they select the candidate that more closely resembles their own views on policy, the more so on those comparatively rare occasions when opposing candidates actually stake out alternative positions; and they are quite prepared to evict incumbents from office when, as they see it, things have run downhill on their watch. And however ill informed and eccentric individual voters may seem, through the miracle of aggregation, the public as a whole may often behave quite sensibly.

Those content with bleak conclusions seem to us sadly mistaken about the problems and possibilities of democratic politics. Theories of democracy that focus on preference aggregation or the pluralistic clash of interests are portraits of a polity in trouble, not any kind of ideal worth affirming. The real hope lies in reforming our politics and practices, not in lowering our aspirations. Given what passes for democratic debate these days, we shouldn't be too surprised by the bleak empirical findings—by the clouds of disillusioning facts. Still, it is not difficult to discern patches of blue sky, and not utopian to press for more.

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