

P A R T V

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NEW DEBATES  
IN POLITICAL  
BEHAVIOR

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## CHAPTER 23

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# AN INSTITUTIONAL THEORY OF POLITICAL CHOICE

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WHY do voters choose one candidate over another? Why do citizens choose one policy alternative over another? Two types of answers predominate—rational choice and psychological. The two have been treated as rivals. This chapter focuses on the emergence of a perspective that takes them to be allies—an institutional theory of political choice (see, for relevant extant work, Adams, Merrill, and Grofman 2005; Bendor, Diermeier, and Ting 2003; Bendor, Kumar, and Siegel 2005; Sniderman 2000; Jackman and Sniderman 2002; Sniderman and Bullock 2004). The purpose of the chapter is to serve as a billboard advertisement for innovative research developing this theory. This research comes in different flavors, some more formal, some more psychological.<sup>1</sup> But

\* We have many to thank but none more than Stephen Haber, James H. Kuklinski, and Arthur Lupia. It is a pleasure to acknowledge our debt to them.

<sup>1</sup> Terminology is treacherous. The study of political behavior is standardly styled as a behavioral approach. Focusing on what is doing the work of explanation, rather than what is being explained, psychological is more apt. The behavioral approach we lay out here is a combination of formal and psychological perspectives.

there is a shared explanatory taste. Each points to the role of political institutions in structuring political choices.

The key intuition is this. In politics, citizens do not get their choice of choices. They must select from an organized menu of choices. It follows that a theory of political choice requires two types of explanatory mechanisms—an internal one to account for choice between alternatives plus an external one to account for the alternatives on offer. Political behavior research has traditionally concentrated on the former (e.g. see Mutz chapter and chapters on electoral choice in this volume); formal theoretic accounts, on the second. This chapter lays out a theoretical framework for integrating the internal and external explanatory mechanisms.

The broad strategy of turning attention to the role of external factors in structuring choice is being pursued on a number of fronts—for example, the work of Kuklinski and his colleagues on information environments (Kuklinski et al. 2001; Jerit, Barabas, and Bolsen 2006); Druckman on framing (2004, 2001a, 2000b; Druckman and Nelson 2003); and Saris (2004) on the structure of the task. All bring out conditions of choice that shape the actual choices made. We shall nonetheless formulate the problem differently. What is needed, we believe, is a formulation that does double duty. For one, it accounts for the way that choices citizens make are organized—why, for example, are political choices framed as they are and not some other way? For another, it accounts for the fit between the external organization of choice sets and internal processes of choice—why exactly do patterns of consistency imposed by external factors mesh with patterns of consistency generated by internal ones? We accordingly lay out an institutional theory of political choice.

Institutions are a notoriously big tent construct. We are concerned with only one small corner of political institutions—the logic of electoral competition mediated by political parties. An institutional theory of political choice still has its training wheels on. But we believe it brings—and not merely promises—advances on two fronts. First, it picks out a common mechanism, political parties, regulating the organization of alternatives on offer and conditioning choices between them. Second, it points to an explanation of (Herbert) Simon's puzzle: how can citizens make approximately coherent political choices given the limits on their informational fund and computational capacities?

## 1 BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS AS A MODEL

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A leg-in-both-camps approach can be awkward. It can even appear self-contradictory. Rational choice is an effort to explain choices assuming full rationality under the circumstances. A behavioral approach is an effort to account for choices where a full rationality approach falls short (Camerer, Loewenstein, and Rabin 2004). The appearance of awkwardness is real. The appearance of self-contradiction is not.

Behavioral economics offers a model of how to tie rational and psychological perspectives together.

Three premises underpin behavioral economics. The first is that actors aim to maximize their welfare. The second assumption is that they have limited computational capacities and attention. The third is that their expectations about the actions of others and desires are fixed (Kreps 2004). These three premises—utility maximization, bounded rationality, and the endogeneity of beliefs and tastes—generate the signature research program of behavioral economics: the discovery and analysis of systematic departures from axiomatic choice (Camerer 2003). To the degree that observed choice diverges from strictly rational choice, and a principled explanation of the difference can be developed, a behavioral approach is value-added.

So, too, with political choice, though with a difference in starting point. In economics, the presumption is that people must (on the whole) be making rational choices: otherwise, they would have gone under. In the study of political behavior, the presumption is just the other way around. It is easier to see how they get things wrong than how they can get them right. Under ordinary circumstances, after all, ordinary citizens pay minimal attention to, and are minimally knowledgeable about, politics (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). It is far from obvious how they nonetheless can make coherent choices<sup>2</sup>—which, of course, begs the question of whether they indeed can make any reasonable choices at all (Bartels 2003).

In the judgment of many, a solution to the problem of coherent choice compatible with any heavy breathing representation of democratic citizenship is a chimera. From our vantage point, the problem of coherent choice has seemed intractable because of the one-legged stance of traditional studies in political behavior. They have proceeded on the assumption that citizens organize their preferences relying on their own resources. A two-legged stance is necessary. Choices among distinct alternatives depend not only on the attributes of the chooser, but also on the properties of choice sets (McFadden 1974). Citizens are capable of making coherent choices to the degree that political institutions, and particularly political parties, do the heavy lifting of organizing coherent choice sets.

## 2 PROPERTIES OF POLITICAL CHOICE SETS

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Students of Comparative Politics not infrequently acknowledge they are taking their lead from advances in American politics. It gives us pleasure to reciprocate. Students of comparative politics have brought out the foundational role of electoral systems, and in

<sup>2</sup> By a coherent choice we mean selection of the available policy alternative most consonant with a citizen's general view of the matter. Note that this is a narrower version of Hurwitz and Peffley's (1987) concept of vertical linkage.

so doing they have called attention to the institutional structuring of political alternatives (e.g. Cox 1997). Our focus, though, is proximal, not distal—not the underlying structure of political systems, but political choice sets produced by party systems.<sup>3</sup>

The policy location of the parties (candidates) in spatial voting models has been the most thoroughly examined property of choice sets in politics (Downs 1957). Over the last four decades modelers have productively explored the logical implications of varying Downs's postulates, bringing into play among other factors, the entry of third parties (Palfrey 1984), the participation decisions of potential party activists (Aldrich 1983), uncertainty of voters' about the policy locations of candidates and of candidates about the policy locations of voters (e.g. Wittman 1983; Palfrey 1984; Calvert 1985; Roemer 2001; for an excellent overview see Grofman 2004). It is noteworthy, however, that a basic identification problem has just been identified. Fiorina (2005) shows how candidates moving in a policy space over time can make it appear as if voters are changing over time. Assume that candidates become polarized. Moderate voters then can choose only between two extreme candidates. In turn, they appear to be extreme themselves—even though they have remained moderate. It is necessary, it follows, to take account of the spatial locations of candidates over time to identify the factors that lead voters to favor one candidate over the other at each point in time (see also van Houweling and Sniderman 2004).

We shall examine spatial reasoning in the context of political institutions, but we begin by considering non-spatial properties of choice sets in politics, among them, the number, polarity, and labeling of alternatives.

### 3 NUMBER OF ALTERNATIVES

A restriction on the number of alternatives on offer is a strategic property of political choice sets. In a break-the-mold study, Glaser (2002) assessed the impact of separable versus bundled choices. The issue was support for or opposition to a new school bond. In one experimental condition, respondents were presented with the total package of improvements to vote up or down; in the other condition, the three major components of the package—improvements in heating system, in computers, and in the gymnasium—were put to voters as three independent choices. When the alternatives were bundled together as one package, the bond issue failed to get the necessary 60 percent support. When the alternatives were independently presented, each component of the bond issue got the necessary 60 percent. Glaser's study points to the broad variety of ways in which the structure of choices can affect a political outcome.

<sup>3</sup> We came across Kriesi's (2005) study of the politics of referenda in Switzerland too late in the process of preparing this chapter to take full advantage of it. It is the most developed account to date of what it means analytically to take the view that party elites structure choice sets in politics, and thereby condition both the processes by which choices are made and the choices that in fact are made.

As a general proposition, the coherence of choice should vary inversely with the number of alternatives: as the number increases, the probability of choosing the policy alternative closest to one's general view of the matter decreases. We have no evidentiary cards to pull out of the deck to document directly the cost of larger numbers of alternatives; but a fair amount of side information suggests this is a reasonable hypothesis.

A research literature on choice overload has emerged.<sup>4</sup> Decreasing the variety of product types at an online grocery store increases sales (Boatwright and Nunes 2001). Presenting people with either a large number of alternatives or a small one affects the likelihood that they will take satisfaction in the choice they have made (Iyengar and Lepper 2000; see also Iyengar, Huberman, and Jiang 2004). Increasing the number of alternatives decreases the likelihood that a choice will be made (Dhar 1997). As for explicitly political choices, Niemi and Westholm (1984) have shown that temporal stability of policy positions is higher in multi-party Sweden than in two-party America; while Gordon and Segura (1997) make the intriguing suggestion that levels of political sophistication are lower in multi-party systems due to their institutional configuration.

The classic literature on belief system consistency also bears on the connection between number of alternatives and consistency of choice, although again indirectly. Constraint is the ground floor measure of coherence in mass belief systems. Some years ago, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976) announced that constraint had shot up in the mid-1960s from the minimal levels of the 1950s reported by Converse (1964). Their explanation: the politics of the sixties was more engaging than that of the fifties. In an elegant experiment, Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus (1978) demonstrated that the change in levels of constraint was instead a function of the introduction of a different question format—one in which respondents are asked to choose between two policies rather than whether they support or oppose one policy (see also Bishop, Tuchfarber, and Oldendick 1978).

This methodological dust-up throws some light on the properties of choice sets in politics—in particular, on the optimal number of alternatives to maximize the translation of general political orientations into consistent policy preferences. It may be thought the optimal number is one. Then voters cannot be distracted by a second. But the studies of Sullivan et al. and Bishop et al. show that voters can connect their positions on different issues more consistently when they are confronted with a choice between two competing alternatives rather than simply voting a policy up or down. It is as though the contrast between alternatives makes clearer what is at stake. A deeper point about validity has not been noticed in the shadows. To get a fix on the abilities of citizens to think coherently about political questions, it is necessary to put questions in the way they actually are presented to them in politics. This may sound a truism. It is anything but. The post-1964 format more nearly approximates the shape of choices in a competitive party system than the pre-1964 one; and it is in response to the post-1964 format that citizens show more

<sup>4</sup> We are indebted to Scott Nicholson for directing us to this research literature.

constraint. Curiously, the conclusion that has been drawn is that constraint has remained low. It is a curious conclusion because the post-1964 format has more external validity than the pre-1964 format; which suggests that the more likely interpretation is that constraint was as high before 1964 as after, not that constraint was as low after the mid-sixties as before.

Ideological coherence is the most demanding standard of consistency for mass belief systems. A path-breaking set of studies in the Political Action Project (see Barnes et al. 1979) explored levels of ideological consistency in mass belief systems across several nations. Fuchs and Klingemann (1989) made a meticulous comparison of West Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. West Germans and the Dutch are more readily able to define what the terms left and right mean in the political parlance of their respective countries than are Americans in theirs. “On the basis of these data,” they argue, “we have to conclude that the left–right schema is not currently institutionalized in the United States to the same extent and in the same way as it is in the two European countries” (Fuchs and Klingemann 1989, 209).

This observation may be taken as a property of public opinion that conditions the political strategies of party elites. It is our suggestion, however, to reason the other way around—to endogenize public opinion. Whether or not citizens think in ideological terms depends on whether elites stimulate citizens to think in those terms or not. In the 1970s and 1980s, when the Political Action Project studies were conducted, party politics was less ideologically coherent in the United States than in western Europe. With less ideologically distinct parties, citizens in the US needed to make a larger inferential leap to see politics as a left–right game. Now, American elites are more ideologically distinct (Poole and Rosenthal 1997). In response, the belief systems of Americans should have become more ideologically congruent, as indeed they have (Layman and Carsey 2002; Levendusky 2006). In equilibrium, levels of ideological understanding are conditional on levels of ideological polarization among partisan elites, not the other way around.

## 4 POLARIZATION OF ALTERNATIVES

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The first generation of framing studies of political choice (e.g. Zaller 1992) demonstrated that large numbers of ordinary citizens could be moved from one side of an issue to the opposite, depending on whether the policy was framed in a way to elicit support *or* to evoke opposition. Understandably, this “flip-flop” result has been interpreted as evidence of inconsistency of political choice; indeed, of the absence of genuine attitudes even on major issues of public policy. Sniderman and Theriault (2004) hypothesized, however, that under the pressure of electoral competitions, choice sets in politics become bipolar: if citizens oppose one course of action, they act as though it follows that they should support the other, and the other way about.

Their experiment reproduced the design of previous framing experiments where only one frame was presented to respondents, but it added an alternative version where both frames are presented. Presented with one frame at a time, their results replicate the earlier studies: respondents swing first to one side of an issue, then to the other. But when they are presented with “competing” frames, rather than being confused by contradictory perspectives, their thinking is clarified; and they become more, not less, likely to choose the policy alternative closest to their general view of the matter. It is worth noting that this stabilizing effect is at least as pronounced for the less educated as for the more.

Druckman’s ensuing research program on framing effects has been hat-doffing. He has investigated the role of credible sources (Druckman 2001*a*); deliberation (Druckman and Nelson 2003); elite competition (Druckman 2004); and framing—strictly construed as preference reversals over logically equivalent alternatives (Druckman 2004). One of many pertinent findings concerns the effect of political argument. The consequence of simultaneous exposure to competing frames, he demonstrates, is to extinguish framing effects, or very nearly so.

The results of Druckman and of Sniderman and Theriault point to the potential value of rethinking the ingrained image of public opinion as superficial and incoherent. The first generation of framing experiments put respondents in an artificial situation. They were allowed to hear only one side of the argument. But in real politics, no party can control public debate. They compete both about what position should be adopted and how an issue should be framed—it is hard, after all, to do one without the other. Studying reactions in an artificial situation, in which only one way to think about an issue is presented, public opinion analysts have concluded that confused citizens can easily be swayed to one side or the other of issues. Studying reactions in a situation more akin to politics suggests a different conclusion. The clash of competing considerations, so far from confusing citizens, helps clarify the choices before them.

The polarization of alternatives, conditional on the party system in place, also throws light on the meaning of consistency in political choice. It is a natural tendency, and often an appropriate one, to take maximizing self-interest as a condition of consistency. On this view, inconsistency consists in selection of the alternative on offer at odds with economic self-interest. It seems so obvious that when some take a choice at odds with self-interest, this is in and of itself a proof of ignorance. So Bartels (2005) has concluded that the strong plurality support for Bush’s tax cut is entirely attributable to simple ignorance. This interpretation is understandable, particularly in a discipline with a tradition of concern about false consciousness. Lupia et al. (2005), however, observe that this judgment of mass ignorance presupposes that there is just one perspective a reasonable person can take on the tax cut—an economic one. A reasonable presupposition often. But frequently in politics, and perhaps distinctively in politics, there is a clash of points of view—different conceptions of what is just; of how to achieve it; even of how economies and societies work. Then there is no one right answer that all reasonable people should reach. The “right” answer hinges on the perspective they adopt; and reasonable people can adopt different perspectives. Thus Lupia and his colleagues

show that well-informed liberals opposed the Bush tax cut; and conservatives—whether well-informed or not—favored it. It is not excessive to count as rational the choice of the policy alternative most appropriate to one's overall outlook on politics. It is all the more ironic, then, that the presumption that there is only one rational answer has obscured the rationality of citizens' political choices.

## 5 LABELING OF ALTERNATIVES AND POLITICAL SIGNALING

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The classic hypothesis of ideology by proxy (Campbell et al. 1960) posited that signals of salient social groups enable voters to take coherent ideological positions, even in the absence of their understanding an ideology. They could, for example, take consistent positions on racial policies without an understanding of the policies themselves. They need to know only how they felt about black Americans and whether the policies help or hinder them—hardly an arcane level of knowledge. Analysis of endorsement effects advanced the study of political signaling another step. In a classic study, Lupia (1994) showed that voters used information providers' reputations as reliable signals (see also Lupia and McCubbins 1998).

Signaling has thus been in the analytical cupboard for some time. Yet, curiously studies of political signaling have focused on implicitly political groups, not explicitly political ones. Interest groups like labor or blacks have been studied; political parties neglected. No doubt it sounds odd to say so. There is a warehouse of studies of party identification, including the role of parties, as an inner gyroscope signaling choice (e.g. Jacoby 1988). But party identification is one side of the coin, and not the obviously most relevant side for analysis of parties as strategic actors. Party loyalties endure, indeed strengthen, over a lifetime. Moreover, they tend to be passed from father and mother to son and daughter. So party loyalties run across as well as within political generations; which is to say that the responses they evoke are sunk in the politics of a generation or more ago, not those of today or even those of yesterday. The persisting influence of party identification is thus one more illustration of the truth of William Faulkner's epigram: The past is never dead. It's not even past.

All the more reason, then, to complement analysis of the enduring loyalties of party supporters with analysis of political parties as strategic actors in the here and now. They marshal resources; they direct attention; they signal positions. More broadly, on our view, it is the logic of electoral competition operating through the medium of political parties that organizes psychological processes, not the other way around. In an ingenious study, Druckman (2001*b*) examined a paradigmatic experiment of Kahneman and Tversky—the classic Asian disease problem. In one arm of the experiment, the K-T procedure was replicated; in the second arm, the risk-averse

and risk-seeking alternatives were labeled the Democrat's and the Republican's programs, respectively; in the third arm, the party labels on the risk-averse and risk-seeking alternatives were reversed. Without party labels, Druckman's results mirror the irrational preference reversals of Kahneman and Tversky. With party labels, preference reversals disappear for partisans of one party, and are greatly reduced for partisans of the other—an example of the anchoring role of attachments to political parties worth reflection.

Druckman's results are consistent with an interpretation of party labels as affective tags, evoking responses at the present moment because of loyalties acquired in the past. As partisan elites have polarized, however, they have sent an increasingly clear institutional signal about what it means to be a Democrat or a Republican: Democrats stand for X, Republicans stand for Y, and X and Y are distinct policy programs (Poole and Rosenthal 1997; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 2001). Party labels are now brand names.

Party brand names are, of course, not the only political brand names. Nearly as important are ideological labels. It is a cardinal feature of (many) party systems that the party and ideology brand names now go hand in hand. Of course, in the nature of things the two sometimes diverge: liberal parties put up a conservative candidate; conservative parties a liberal one. Huckfeldt and his colleagues (2004, 2005) have exploited the imperfect correlation between the two major brand names in American politics to pry apart two possible interpretations of party as a brand name—psychological and ideological. They zero in on reactions when party and ideology signals conflict—the off-diagonals as they style them; and show that ideology dominates partisanship in the off-diagonals—a result that ingeniously suggests the importance of political ideas in politics.

The polarization of elite politics has of course had the effect of depopulating the off-diagonals, but not in the way commonly supposed. It is a cliché of contemporary American politics that their supporters have polarized as party activists have polarized. America, it is incessantly said, is now divided between blue states and red. In a tour de force, Fiorina (2005) has shown that most Americans remain moderate; indeed as moderate now as three decades ago, and what is more, moderate also on hot button issues like abortion and homosexuality. Levendusky (2006), however, has discovered an underlying shift. As party elites have gone through a process of polarization, their supporters in response have gone through a process of sorting: they have increasingly brought their politics into line with party attachments. They are not more likely to be at the extremes than they were, but they are markedly more likely to be on the same side politically as their party leaders. Party leaders and party supporters have thus traveled parallel paths but unequal distances.

Or more exactly, party leaders have been traveling on one path, and their supporters on separate but parallel paths. In what sense separate paths? In what sense parallel? The theoretical perspective we are developing posits that party leaders structure political choices. But what does it mean for them to impose a structure? If their supporters must conform, must they conform across the board? If not, why not? Carmines and Layman (1997) and Layman and Carsey (2002) have transformed

our understanding of the structure of public opinion, showing that the basic organization units of mass belief systems are policy agendas. The role that government should play on providing a safety net and health care are examples of issues on the social welfare agenda; abortion and homosexuality, of issues on the social values agenda; government job training programs and business loans for blacks, of issues on the race agenda. Party supporters tend to take consistently liberal (or conservative) positions on each pair of issues, consistent with their party's overall stance on the issues. They also are more consistent, the more strongly they identify with their party and know how its position differs from the competing party's position. The question thus is not whether mass publics are capable of constraint; substantial numbers are. It is, when are their beliefs constrained and why?

This research demonstrates that citizens take consistent positions for issues on the same agenda; but the positions they take for issues on one agenda have little to do with the positions they take on another. With reflection, it is obvious why. Believe that governmental job training programs promote government bureaucracy and undercut individual initiative and responsibility—and you have a relevant reason to believe that governmental public housing programs will do the same. But what is the relevant reasoning connecting support for a job-training program and support for gay rights? In short, the question is not why people often fail to make connections across policy agendas. The question is rather why should they?

The linkage across agendas is weak, but links in a chain can be tightened. Under what conditions can the linkage in mass belief systems be strengthened?

To bring out the importance of party brand names in generating issue constraint, Tomz and Sniderman (2005) presented party-labeled policy alternatives (as they are in real life) to a medley of policies in one experimental condition, and non-labeled (as they are in standard public opinion surveys) policy alternatives in another. Their experimental results show that party branding policy alternatives does not increase constraint for party supporters for issues on the same policy agenda (corroborating Carmines, Layman, and Carsey's results by a different method). On the other hand, party labels *do* increase constraint for issues on different agendas.

The interpretation of this finding may appear obvious. It has become an epistemological reflex to view more consistency in the political thinking of ordinary citizens as normatively more desirable than less; understandably so against the background of decades of research reporting their patchy knowledge of public affairs and miscellaneous combinations of ideas. How can one not cheer in the face of evidence that ordinary citizens are not so hopelessly muddle-headed as they sometimes appear to be? Party signals are a heuristic enabling them to take consistent stands across a number of fronts, in a word, to engage politics in more nearly the same overarching terms as elites engage it.

Tomz and Sniderman point to a less happy interpretation of the signaling finding. It makes sense that ordinary citizens should treat policy agendas as separate matters since, in fact, they are separate matters. Protection for the environment and government assistance for the disadvantaged do not logically fit together. It is otherwise for party elites. They are tied together organizationally, if not logically. Consider Stimson's (2004)

theory of career incentives and low dimensionality politics. From time to time, party activists and leaders find themselves in the minority on an issue that comes to the fore (e.g. pro-life Democrats). Since recruitment tends to operate on the basis of the majority position, the size of the majority steadily increases. And since retirement cycles inexorably roll on, the size of the minority steadily decreases. Voice quickly becomes ineffective and exit always is costly; indeed, usually career-ending. Parties are coordination devices: they bring together activists with different agendas. They accordingly have strong incentives to achieve consensus, or at any rate to avoid dissensus.<sup>5</sup> Hence the paradoxical simplicity of political thought of the cognitively complex and politically engaged.

Party activists, then, have a good reason to keep to a common line. Party supporters do not: they pay no price for either voice or exit. Two quite different interpretations of Tomz and Sniderman's link-tightening finding now suggest themselves. The first is the familiar one. Party is a heuristic that enables people to take politically coherent stands, and thus come a little bit closer to the democratic ideal of a citizen. The second interpretation, however, has a bitter rather than a sweet normative taste. Rather than political signals acting as an epistemological crutch, they render party adherents susceptible to manipulation by their party's elites, who can and do induce them to take positions they would not on their own.

Another study has brought out a companion quandary, focusing on the process of spatial reasoning (van Houweling and Sniderman 2004). So far as voters follow Downs's rule, choosing the candidate whose issue position is closer to theirs, the logic of electoral competition puts pressure on candidates to take positions similar to the voters' positions. Of course other considerations—for example, uncertainty of voter positions—can intervene (see Grofman 2004). But spatial reasoning in all its variations, neo-Downsian as well as Downsian, assumes that voters respond identically—and accurately—to candidate positions. But what reason is there to believe that the positions candidates take are the positions that voters perceive them to take? Candidates wave party banners for a reason: because it encourages party supporters to see the candidate as one of them. We like those who are like us not least because they are like us. In turn, we think that they think what we think. So the more strongly voters identify with their party, the more likely they are to judge that the candidate of their party represents their views.

Notice that the hypothesis, then, is *not* that the power of party identification moves party adherents to support the candidate of their party for reasons of sentiment, although it most certainly does. The hypothesis instead is that party loyalty biases spatial reasoning itself. To investigate this biasing hypothesis, van Houweling and Sniderman (2004) carried out a large-scale experiment ( $N=7,000$ ). In one experimental condition, respondents were presented with the (randomly assigned) positions of party branded candidates. In the other condition, they were presented with competing candidates who were not party labeled. Respondents then were asked which candidate, if either, represents their position. It was not a surprise to observe partisan bias. It was staggering

<sup>5</sup> The idea that issues from different agendas—say, gay rights and support for the disadvantaged—are tied together at a deep level should by no means be dismissed. The deep connections between temperament and ideology remain to be plumbed.

to observe the magnitude of the bias. An absolute majority of strong party identifiers judge the position of the candidate of their party to correspond to theirs, even when the position of the candidate of the other party *unambiguously* is closer to theirs. This finding of partisan bias underlines the centrality of a political dynamic that formal models of representation have put on the sidelines. If a party candidate can unambiguously disagree with his supporters, yet his supporters perceive him to agree with them, party elites have more freedom of maneuver than has been acknowledged.

Candidates do not have unbounded freedom of maneuver, ironically for the same reason that they have a good deal of freedom. As Cox and McCubbins (1993) established in their pioneering analysis of party brand names, parties want to have an effective brand name. A clear and consistent brand is an asset for Congressional candidates. If a voter knows a candidate's party, then they know (more or less) where he stands on a host of issues; no less important, where he *should* stand on them. In turn, if he violates his party's reputation, he loses the reputational advantage and possibly worse. Even so, so far as van Houweling and Sniderman's results generalize, party elites have more freedom of maneuver than has been recognized.

## 6 INSTITUTIONS AND RATIONAL EXPECTATIONS

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When voters make choices in an election, they need to form expectations about what will happen down-stream. "If [a voter] is rational," as Downs (1957) observed, "he knows that no party will be able to do everything it says it will do. Hence he cannot merely compare platforms; instead he must estimate in his own mind what the parties would actually do were they in power" (39). In the spirit of Downs, we borrow the phrase rational expectations. In what ways can citizens, looking down the game tree, make current choices in the light of accurate expectations about future conditions?

A number of neo-Downsian theories have explored the dynamics of rational expectations so understood. Grofman's (1985), for example, has focused attention between the status quo and rational discounting of candidate positions and the status quo. The status quo is sticky and is known to be so. Extreme candidates are therefore unlikely to be able to carry out policies as advertised. A rational person will accordingly discount their extreme positions, imputing to them the more moderate policies they actually will pursue when they are in office. Grofman's status quo hypothesis is interesting politically, and not merely psychologically, since the effect of discounting is to strengthen the hand of non-centrist candidates.

Fiorina's (2003) policy balancing model offers an institutionally differentiated model of rational expectations. Some citizens, he hypothesizes, split their vote, supporting one party for the executive, its opponent for the legislature, to promote

a more moderate policy than either party would put into law if they had control of both executive and legislature (see also Alesina and Rosenthal 1995). Citizens, Fiorina cautions, might not consciously pursue this strategy of offsetting votes. They nevertheless can, and some evidence suggests do, act as if they were pursuing it.

Lacy and Paolino (2003, 1998) have mounted a two-front research program on separation of powers and vote choice. On the formal front, they have developed the first balancing model unencumbered by standard—and implausible—assumptions of homogeneous parties or nationwide districts. On the empirical front, they have developed a direct measure of expected policy positions of successful presidential candidates, providing for the first time a bridge to move from hypothetical as if reasoning to empirical hypothesis testing.

Multi-party systems invite theories of rational expectations. The field of comparative politics has generated an abundant literature on strategic voting (see Cox 1997 for a review). As a concrete example of the role of political institutions in structuring choice sets, consider coalition bargaining in a PR system. In such a system, citizens understand that (except in atypical cases) no single party will be able to form the government on its own. A coalition government will be formed, and the voter must calculate what combination of parties will best realize his policy aims. Kedar (2005) provides an exemplary study, developing and empirically testing a decision-theoretic model of policy balancing in parliamentary elections. She shows that moderate voters do better by voting for extreme parties to balance out forces on the other side of the ideological spectrum than by voting for the party whose platform matches their own preferences.

Rational expectations is thus another illustration of our most fundamental theoretical premise: to understand choice in politics, *it is necessary to take account not only of the attributes of choosers but also the properties of choice sets.*<sup>6</sup>

## 7 POLITICAL PARTIES AND POLITICAL REASONING

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The role of political parties as focal points brings out another aspect of the institutional structuring of choice. Political parties have incentives to focus attention selectively, to bring some issues to the fore and relegate others to the background. In turn, voters will see one party better representing them than another, depending on whether their attention is directed to one set of concerns rather than another. Political parties are not the only institutional mechanism for focusing attention. They are, however, the prime one for competing elites to focus attention as an electoral strategy.

<sup>6</sup> Many studies using the Comparative Study of Electoral Systems (CSES) data are relevant to this point, although we cannot review them here due to space constraints. We refer the interested reader to [www.cses.org/resources/results/results.htm](http://www.cses.org/resources/results/results.htm) for a comprehensive listing of the relevant work.

Johnston et al. (1992) present a dramatic example of the role of parties in focusing attention. In the 1988 federal election in Canada, two issues dominated the agenda. One was the Meech Lake Accord, redefining federalism to give the province of Quebec a greater measure of autonomy; the other, ratification of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). At the start of the campaign, both issues were front and center. The Meech Lake Accord, however, threatened to split the eastern and western wings of the Conservative party. So the Conservative party focused on NAFTA. The Accord also threatened the Liberal party, plus NAFTA opened the door to demagogic appeals to national identity. So it, too, focused on NAFTA. The result was to retire one of the two issues at the forefront of public attention at the start of the campaign, and through the strategic calculation of party elites, restrict the menu of choice to a single issue.

Under the pressure of electoral competition, politicians cannot avoid strategic choices of focal points: what concern, which goal, to spotlight? Stimson (2004) has drawn the main lines of the strategic logic of parties in focusing attention; while Dickson and Scheve (2006) offer a display window example of formal theory exploiting psychological assumptions, to specify conditions under which incentives bring considerations of identity to the fore. A fully articulated theory of attention is the next step.

Attention is one thing; the intake of information another. To what extent—and, more fundamentally, in what way—are citizens capable of updating their beliefs? The study of motivated reasoning has documented citizens' strain to consistency in their political thinking (Lodge and Taber 2000). The strength of a strain to consistency is not invariant. Motivated skepticism, for example, depends strongly on the strength of people's attitude toward the object and their knowledge about the object (Taber and Lodge 2006). All the same, as a first approximation, it is reasonable to say that people have a pronounced tendency to resist updating. Instructively, people does not just mean the ordinary citizen. It includes the political expert. In a landmark study of expert political predictions, Tetlock offers a striking example of cognitive conservation. When experts make errors in prediction, even unambiguous ones, they often fail to acknowledge that the prediction itself was erroneous. The claim is not that individuals are unaware of new information, which is true enough. It goes farther and posits that they commonly do what it takes cognitively to interpret new information as consistent with their priors. As Tetlock (2005) observes, "There are good reasons for expecting smart people to be bad Bayesians . . . people tend to be balky belief updaters who admit mistakes grudgingly and defend their prior positions tenaciously" (125–6). Of course, we would emphasize, the correct conclusion is *not* that people—even experts—fail to value rationality. They do, more than is commonly appreciated. "They draw the desired conclusion only if they [believe they] can muster up the evidence necessary to support it"—to support, that is, a conclusion that would convince an impartial observer (Kunda 1990, 483). Their reasoning is biased without their being aware it is biased; indeed, biased in the face of their desire that it be unbiased.

Formal models of learning characteristically presume that belief updating is unproblematic. As Keynes would have it, when the facts change, the people change their minds. Formal models of credibility are still more strongly committed to strong

versions of updating; so much so that, in some versions, one act of deception strips a source of trustworthiness (e.g. Sobel 1985). Consider, then, Bullock's (2005) gun-at-your-head demonstration of cognitive conservatism. Bullock gave subjects information about a Republican candidate before they evaluated him. Then he informed a subset that the information was false. Finally, he asked all subjects to evaluate the candidate again. Democrats who learned the information was false revised their opinion of the Republican candidate—but only by a half of the amount they should on Bayesian premises. Republicans did not revise their opinion of the Republican candidate at all. Bullock's experiment thus suggests that belief updating in the face of deception is anything but unproblematic: false information seems to have power even after it is known to be false.

Voters are not blind to the world they live in, even if much of the traditional public opinion literature represents them as deaf and dumb. They are, however, resistant to revising their priors about how problems in the world should be dealt with. But policy preferences nonetheless are updated. How does this happen?

As a rule parties as well as voters are resistant to updating their priors. The tendency of every rational party, Downs (1957) argued, is to maintain continuity in its policies. But parties are also the primary organizational medium through which candidates compete for electoral office. Periodically, they have incentives, because of changes in circumstances or on account of compositional changes in their base, to modify the policy alternatives on their menus. In the early 1970s, for example, the parties took muted stances on the issue of legal abortion, and in fact, many Republican elites were more liberal than their Democratic counterparts. By the 1990s, there had been a turnabout at the elite level. Democrats were clearly the pro-choice party and Republicans were the pro-life party (see Adams 1997).

Here, we believe, is the largest part of the answer to the question of how party adherents update. When parties update their policy menus, their supporters favor their party's new offering for much the same reason they favored its previous one—namely, their attachment to their party and the broad outlooks on politics associated with it. Of course, some cast away their partisan attachments when new policies conflict with their political convictions. More commonly, though, party identification is their anchor, and it is their views on issues—even on hot button issues such as abortion—that swing around to be consistent with their party loyalties, not the other way around (Miller 2000).<sup>7</sup> The process may give the impression of blind loyalty. But in responding to changes in circumstances, it is in the interest of political parties to give the best response in their repertoire. So far as parties update their alternatives on offer in response to incentives from changed circumstances, party supporters need not update

<sup>7</sup> This is typically, although not always, the case. In an exemplary study, Carsey and Layman (2006) discuss the conditions under which citizens who hold views out of step with their party will change either their partisanship or their issue positions. They show that changing partisanship to accommodate your issue position is most likely when citizens are aware of party differences and find the issue to be salient. These conditions (salience and awareness of party differences) are the exception rather than the rule. For most citizens faced with conflicting issue positions and party ID, they change their issue position if they change at all.

on their own to locate the response they would rationally judge best—best, that is to say, conditional on their priors. Realignment aside, the primary mechanism of change in policy preferences, paradoxically, is continuity of party attachments.

## 8 ENVOI

There is an emerging consensus on the value of combining formal and behavioral approaches; on specifying relationships between political institutions and strategic choice; on exploring further the centrality of party loyalty to political choice. Or perhaps better, an emerging synthesis of the three. Combined, they make plain that a theory of choice in politics must take account not only of attributes of the chooser, as has research in the past, but also of properties of the choice set.

Not the least reason that this new direction seems to us progressive is that it is continuous with the established one. It may appear otherwise. Our primary focus has been the role of properties of choice sets in facilitating consistency of belief and choice. To some in public opinion research and to most outside it, the focal theme appears just the opposite—inconsistency. This impression is understandable. The exceptional virtues of Converse and Zaller's contributions have overshadowed the main current of research, what has run in just the opposite direction, concentrating on the analysis of consistency. Online processing, core values, affect, judgmental heuristics, motivated reasoning, even Bayesian updating, all have been brought into play as consistency generators. It would be odd indeed to mount so large and persistent an effort to specify mechanisms of consistency, if there was not a presumption of some substantial measure of consistency in mass belief systems. This presumption is by no means universally shared, of course. The growing body of research on ambivalence is exhibit number one of a persisting interest in inconsistency (see, for example, Alvarez and Brehm 2002; Basinger and Lavine 2005). It has all the same been a side current to this point, not the main one. So far from being at odds with previous work, the research we have reviewed is an extension of it. It is an effort to understand how consistency is imposed by the conditions of choice as well as by the tastes and aptitudes of the chooser.

It is all the more important, then, to flag a major weakness of the new institutional research program. The test of a theory is not just that it is capable of giving an account of newly observed regularities. It must also be capable of giving an account of previous ones. It may give a different interpretation of them. But it must account, as it were, for all the cards on the table. The research we have laid out cannot do so. It cannot account in a satisfying way for the instability and lack of consistency (variously defined) that are the hallmark of Converse and Zaller's landmark works. Some measure of inconsistency is better understood as measurement error as Achen (1975) demonstrated some time ago, and consistency in any case is a matter of degree. But a good deal of muddle

remains, and while the view we have laid out does not deny there is lability in political preference, it cannot give a satisfying in principle explanation of it. Somewhere down the road a more encompassing synthesis will have to be developed.

We are aware that the account that we have set out is not a theory dressed in its Sunday best. We nonetheless think it has some virtues. It calls attention to a new component of a theory of choice, namely, properties of the choice set. It ties properties of political choice sets to political institutions, above all, political parties. And it has the virtue of telling a political story about political choice. Parties are the common focal point of candidates and voters, and the cumulative morale of this body of research is the power of party elites. They manifestly are under pressure to respond to popular preferences. But they can exercise an important measure of autonomy, not merely by their power to persuade their adherents to follow their line, but more deeply, by their power to structure the alternatives on offer and so the choices citizens make. No doubt there is more to the story.

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