1. Introduction

Americans are given plenty of choices. White bread or wheat bread? Save our money or spend our money? Democrat or Republican? Even vote or stay home? We can choose which we prefer and select that option. If we have so many choices, why are we so unhappy? Aren't we getting exactly what we want? Doesn't getting what we want make us happy? The answer is no. Americans are often forced to choose between this or that, but many Americans want this *and* that. When this and that are mutually exclusive, one or the other, and we want both, either choice leads to dissatisfaction.

Janus Democracy is the story of a deeply tormented, confused, and angry public. It is a public at odds with itself. Public opinion research shows us that the public will very often provide majority support for a policy proposal and, simultaneously, provide majority opposition to that same proposal. Political elites have become adept at using polling and focus groups to frame questions in a manner that will yield their preferred outcome. This means politicians on one side can claim that the majority of Americans support their proposed policy. It also means that opposing politicians with a diametrically different policy preference can also claim that the majority of Americans support their proposed policy. Both supporters and opponents of a policy can both claim the mantle of majoritarian legitimacy. This book argues that the majority of the public does indeed have opposite and conflicting preferences on a large variety of issues of social and political importance.

These incompatible preferences lead to dissatisfaction. When people want the opposite of what they want, they will get angry when get what they desired. Everyone is familiar with the cliché "You can't have your cake and eat it too." Quite a large number of people want to have their cake and want to eat their cake. If they eat it, they will be upset because they no longer have it. If they save it for later, they will be upset because they would rather eat it now. Irrespective of their choice, they will be dissatisfied with the decision.

This is much more than simply regretting a decision and changing one's mind. This is about incompatible preferences and our democratic political system's remarkable ability to simultaneously express clashing preferences. We could say people are inconsistent and just move on, but this is far too dismissive given the importance of the issues involved. We can ignore inconsistent people,

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

or simply claim they don't know what they are saying. But when it comes to democracy, the People can't be ignored without abandoning a concept that is essential to democratic governance. The Will of the People is paramount in a democracy. The public, therefore, is not inconsistent, it is *transconsistent*. It is both for *and* against. Understanding the public in this way may seem peculiar, but democracy is a peculiar thing and transconsistency seems to fit the evidence at hand.

People are transconsistent when they adopt two incompatible values, beliefs, attitudes, or preferences. Values are the ideals that people hold dear and allow them to differentiate between right and wrong (Glynn, et al. 1999). But, these values can conflict within a single individual. Beliefs are the underlying assumptions that allow people to understand the world around them. But, "Sometimes an individual's own belief systems clash, producing a state of psychological tension known as cognitive dissonance" (Glynn, et al. 1999, 104). At other times, the people don't realize their belief systems clash and, rather than experiencing cognitive dissonance, they simply maintain two incompatible beliefs simultaneously. Attitudes are predispositions and represent general feelings about particular objects. When these attitudes are expressed they become opinions. When opinions are based on contradictory values and beliefs, the opinions will also be contradictory.

Transconsistency in public opinion occurs when there is a subset of individuals who support and oppose one policy option or when there is a subset of individuals who support one policy and also support an opposite and incompatible policy, such that that subset can, when added to both supporters only and opponents only, produce a majority on both sides of the issue. Transconsistency is the manifestation of dialetheial paradoxes in public opinion. The philosopher Graham Priest argues that dialetheial paradoxes do indeed exist, and he was the first to coin the term *transconsistent*. These paradoxes occur when a statement and the contradiction of that statement are both true (Priest 2006). Priest's logic is compelling, and there is evidence to suggest that these paradoxes can be found in American public opinion. At a fundamental level this occurs because Americans are a pragmatic people. Rather than being bound to rigid ideologies, most Americans are practical minded. They will support whatever seems expedient. Expediency, however, comes at the expense of consistency. The Jamesian version of the pragmatic philosophy has been criticized for being opportunistic and unmoored from reality, but it is this variety that best describes the general will of Americans.

This book is an attempt at interpretive theorizing, not an attempt to empirically establish a causal relationship between pragmatism and survey

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

results. For that, more and more nuanced surveys would need to be conducted. Nevertheless, an initial review of current polling on a number of important issues does suggest that pragmatism is at the core of the American psyche. Throughout the book the term *pragmatism* is used in its more technical and philosophical sense. *Pragmatism* typically refers to practical mindedness, but it is more than that as well. It is a distinct philosophical school of thought that is antifoundational, relies on situational ethics, and focuses on expediency as a decision-making principle. William James, and the pragmatists who follow his school of thought, are often accused by critics as being inconsistent. When two divergent views or preferences are held simultaneously, it may be better to claim that the individual is transconsistent—they want two opposite things at the same time.

In large measure Americans have short memories about the past and are shortsighted about the future. Recent considerations often outweigh previous judgments, and Americans probably don't fully understand the possible consequences of their decisions. This short attention span contributes to their transconsistency because they confront problems without historical perspective or long-range planning. Whatever seems best in the moment becomes their preferred course of action.

This presents some challenges for people who are concerned about the political competency of ordinary Americans. The empirical evidence is firmly established. Americans know some things, but don't know other things. The academic debate then splits along two subjective lines. The first argues that Americans know a few things, but mostly they are grossly ignorant about basic facts and are incapable of making good decisions. Subscribers to this school of thought would have us question democracy as a form of government. The second argues that Americans don't know many things, but what they do know provides them with sufficient information for making good decisions. Subscribers to this theory believe that democracy is safe in the hands of ordinary people.

This debate about public competency, while interesting, misses the point. Knowing what people know doesn't explain why they are they are dissatisfied with their government. However, the competency question does explain, partly, why Americans are capable of being on two sides of the same debate. The lack of basic information can lead to a policy preference that is incompatible with a preferred outcome or with other policy preferences. The public might very well claim to want something they don't actually want. When the government adopts their preferred policy, the public might very well get upset because it's not what they wanted. Competent or not, they're upset with what

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

the government is doing or not doing. There's also the normative consideration. Even incompetent people have a right to express themselves. That's a question of basic civil liberties. Less certain is whether they have a right to influence government, and some would argue they don't.

THE INCOMPETENT PUBLIC

In the United States, most Americans oppose "welfare" but support "aid to the poor." They want to decrease spending on foreign aid and increase spending on foreign aid. They want to amend the Constitution but oppose changing it. They oppose regulations that harm businesses but they also support regulations that protect the public. Contradictory findings like these have puzzled students of public opinion for decades. On too many issues there doesn't seem to be any there "there." The public just doesn't make any logical sense. This leads many to conclude that the public simply has no idea what it is talking about.

Zaller believes there is no such thing as a "true attitude" that can be found by survey researchers (Zaller 1992, 35). These "non-attitudes" are often attributed to public ignorance, response instability, and a lack of ideological constraint (Converse 1964; Converse 1970). Each of these issues has been the subject of much academic research and debate. These problems force us to wonder if democracy is the best form of government, or even a plausible form of government.

Ignorance. The evidence is clear, most Americans know very little about politics and many don't have any interest in politics at all. Most Americans can't identify which party is in control of Congress. This "makes it difficult for voters to assign credit or blame for their performance" (Somin 2016, 30). They are notoriously bad at estimating how much is spent on various programs, and they overestimate the cost of some programs, like the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, while underestimating the cost of others, like Social Security. They are ignorant about the basic structure of government and can't identify many of the rights citizens have or the limits that the Constitution imposes on the government. They don't know what is in specific pieces of legislation, like the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act of 2009, and attribute legislation to the wrong elected official—many believe the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) was enacted during the Obama administration. A majority of Americans incorrectly believed that President Bush claimed there was a "link between Saddam Hussein and the September 11 attacks" (Somin 2016, 50). Voters can't hold their elected officials responsible if they can't identify

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

their elected officials, don't know what is in legislation, and don't know which elected officials supported which government programs.

The situation is worse than just not knowing who is responsible for what. It means the public holds public officials responsible for occurrences that are beyond the official's control. "When voters endure natural disasters they generally vote against the party in power, even if the government could not possibly have prevented the problem" (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 154). Because they punish incumbents for "droughts, floods, and shark attacks . . . most retrospective voting of all kinds is more a matter of kicking the dog than of rationally assessing blame or credit" (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 133). They reward or punish incumbents based on their income growth, but this only holds true for income growth during "the six months leading up to Election Day" (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 172). It does not hold true for income growth during the entire term the incumbent has held office, which is what a rational public would do if it was holding an elected official responsible for their economic policies.

Bryan Caplan argues that, "voters are worse than ignorant; they are, in a word, *irrational*—and vote accordingly" (Caplan 2007, 2). They dismiss unwanted information and prefer bad economic policies. In doing this they harm not only themselves but everyone in society—even those who are well informed and rational. Caplan alludes to the problem of transconsistency: "The median voter wants protection. Protection makes the median voter worse off. But the median voter does *not* want to be worse off" (Caplan 2007, 142). He blames voter ignorance for not understanding and not wanting to understand what would make them better off. Ignorance is only part of the problem; however, there are also deep and conflicting values that won't be affected by gaining more information. Americans have conflicting goals and will be dissatisfied no matter which goal is chosen.

Both Caplan and Lau and Redlawsk believe that voter ignorance leads to bad policies. Caplan argues that prejudice against immigrants and free trade causes the government to adopt policies that make the whole country worse off (Caplan 2007). In the 1970s California experienced a tax revolt and voters passed Proposition 13, which lowered property taxes. This caused major cuts in spending by state and local governments—including cuts in the forest service and fire protection services. When uncontrollable wildfires erupted after several years of drought conditions, experts concluded that there were insufficient firefighters to fight the blazes and that funds to remove dead trees were drastically reduced in the years preceding, which exacerbated the problem. Many residents got lower property taxes only to have their house burn down because of cuts in government provided services (Lau and Redlawsk 2006).

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

Voter ignorance might not make any difference if the ignorant answered questions randomly, or voted randomly, so that the votes of the ignorant would simply cancel out and only the decisions of the well-informed proved decisive for producing a majority. Unfortunately, public opinion is full of systemic errors. Althaus found that, "the aggregate opinions of ill-informed respondents are usually more one sided than those of the well informed" (Althaus 2003, 60) and since most of the public is not well informed the misinformed choice would carry the day. Caplan found that the public has antimarket bias, antiforeign bias, make-work bias, and pessimistic bias. The uninformed don't answer randomly; they have very real prejudices that lean toward producing suboptimal outcomes (Caplan 2007).

Caplan asks, if voters are irrational about political decisions, are they irrational about economic decisions? He says they are not. His rational irrationality argument says that "If agents care about both material wealth and irrational beliefs, then as the price of casting reason aside rises, agents consume less irrationality" (Caplan 2007, 123). Because the price of casting an irrational vote is nearly zero, one vote won't usually change the election outcome, people remain irrational. But when they stand to make or lose money, they become rational very quickly. The problem with this theory, as with most rational choice models, is that perfect information doesn't exist. If people knew that mortgage-backed securities were full of toxic assets, no one would have invested in them. If people knew the housing market was going to crash in 2008, no one would have purchased a house in 2006. People make bad economic decisions all the time, even at the expense of losing their entire life savings. As long as we live in a world where scoundrels are willing to deceive people in order to make a profit, misinformed decisions will occur (Akerlof and Shiller 2015). Many economists would argue that once the scoundrels are found out, people stop doing business with them. Sure, but by then many people have gotten swindled and there's another scoundrel ready to sell them something else. If someone can benefit from deceiving others, then that person will have an incentive to propagate misinformation and poor decisions will be made by those who were deceived. This ignorance and irrationality problem goes beyond just political decision making.

Lau and Redlawsk point out something very important about decision making for anyone who is interested in democracy.

> Evaluation and choice are not the same thing. Evaluation is about making a judgment on some dimension of interest about an object regardless of how many objects are being evaluated, while choice is

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

> inherently about selecting from a set of alternatives. Choice is about commitment, choosing between two or more objects (candidates), and often carries with it a (conscious or unconscious) justification of why one is chosen over the other(s). (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 160)

Public opinion polls allow us to understand which objects are favored or disfavored. When there is a clear majority on an issue the choice should be simple. When a strong majority favors a policy a democratic government should adopt it. When a strong majority disfavors a policy a democratic government should reject it.

But the issue gets complicated when there are competing majorities. What happens when there is a majority that supports and a majority that opposes the same policy? Achen and Bartels, in their study of elections conclude that "election outcomes are mostly just erratic reflections of the current balance of partisan loyalties in a given political system. In a two-party system with competitive elections, that means that the choice between the candidates is essentially a coin toss" (Achen and Bartels 2016, 35). This conclusion is largely correct, but the question is why? They argue that political preferences stem from social identities, but this doesn't explain the randomness they found in their results. Identities just don't change often enough to explain why we have two major parties locked in a perpetual and closely contested battle, where they regularly switch places from majority to minority status. This book argues that the coin toss nature of public choice occurs because the public is trans-consistent on many of the most important issues affecting our country. When their evaluation of an issue supports two contradictory positions, then their choice is a coin toss. The theory of dialetheial paradoxes allows for individuals to favor both heads and tails, or disfavor both heads and tails. This theoretical insight fills in a gap that was left open by Achen and Bartels.

Consistency. Elites have been found to be more knowledgeable, to be more internally consistent, to have more stable responses over time, and to be more ideological than the masses (Marrietta 2012; Chong and Druckman 2007b; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jennings 1992; Zaller 1992; Converse 1970; Converse 1964). Converse argues political elites and those with higher levels of education have more ideological constraint; that is, there is a very high and predicable correlation between different idea elements. For example, "if a legislator is noted for his insistence upon budget balancing and tax-cutting, we can predict with a fair degree of success that he will also tend to oppose expansion of government welfare activities" (Converse 1964, 210). But a voter

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

who supports tax cutting may also support the expansion of government welfare programs, and thereby lack ideological constraint. Among the general public there is less likely to be a set of responses that would fit neatly into the ideological camps (Converse 1964).

Response instability is when the same respondent gives different answers at different times. Converse found that only 20 percent of respondents had stable attitudes from one election to the next on issues for which one would not expect a rapid change. He argues the public has "non-attitudes" because "it seemed implausible that large proportions of the American population . . . had shifted their beliefs from support of creeping socialism to defense of free enterprise, and that a correspondingly large proportion had moved in the opposite direction, forsaking free enterprise for advocacy of further federal incursions into the private sector" (Converse 1970, 171). Some respondents will state they have "no opinion," but most are "fabricating an opinion" on matters they don't know or care about (Converse 1970, 176). Converse concludes that most Americans aren't responding to survey questions through an ideological lens that would lead to both response stability and ideological constraint. If Americans are pragmatic, there is no reason for us to expect ideological consistency or response stability.

This lack of consistency, however, is not a "non-attitude." It is a real reflection of competing goals held by ordinary people. A Republican legislator may support lower taxes and fewer social services. A Democratic legislator may support higher taxes and more social services. But voters may support lower taxes and more social services. Those voters have what we might call a "bi-attitude." If those voters had to choose between the two partisan legislators, they have reasons to support or oppose either, and neither will provide exactly what they prefer. Beyond that, irrespective of who they vote for, or who wins the election, the voters will have reasons to be dissatisfied with the result. Those voters will get something they don't want with either choice.

Zaller's observation that people can absorb contradictory information and not realize that there is contradiction is important (Zaller 1992). Surveys have found that conflicting majorities exist on many social and political questions. McClosky and Zaller noticed that on some issues a majority of Americans would support an idea in the abstract and oppose it in practice (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Most Americans support "the basic principles of democracy when they are put in abstract terms," but "that consensus does not exist on more concrete questions involving the application of democratic principles" (Prothro and Grigg 1960, 284). Specifically, "Many Americans endorse equal opportunity as an abstract value but fail to accept the specific

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

measures that seem necessary to bring it about in practice" (McClosky and Zaller 1984, 83). In the 1940s, for example, overwhelming majorities believed that black children should have the same chance to get a good education as white children. Yet, large majorities opposed the integration of the schools (McClosky and Zaller 1984). Paradoxically, a majority supported a good education for African Americans and a majority opposed the admission of African Americans to the good schools. To be fair, maybe they supported the "separate but equal" doctrine as a principle. Yet, they opposed equal funding as a practical matter of taxation. "A third of white respondents to the GSS who both endorsed school desegregation and lived in all-white neighborhoods believed that whites have the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods" and 85 percent opposed busing for the purposes of integration (Hochschild and Einstein 2015, 23). They had no objection to school integration per se. It's just that they wanted the ability to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods, and they opposed bussing that would bring blacks into their neighborhood schools. They believed blacks should be treated fairly and as equals, but also that they should be allowed to discriminate against blacks because of their race. In this way they can claim to not be racist, while still holding racist views. Findings like these demonstrate that Americans are capable of marvelous duplicities. They can support something in the abstract and oppose it in practice. They may also support a policy in practice while opposing it on principle.

Many of the uninformed, and even some of the informed, are likely to "flip-flop" because respondents tend to answer questions from momentary considerations (Lockerbie and Borrelli 1990; Zaller 1992; Lodge and Tabor 2013). This means that a prominent news story will impact responses to questions. This suggests that public opinion is highly malleable and that support or opposition to policies depends more on superficial momentary considerations rather than well considered analysis of problems. Zaller had an important insight when he found that people are exposed to all types of information designed to persuade them in one direction or another, but that "most people on most issues are relatively uncritical about the ideas they internalize. In consequence, they fill up their minds with large stores of only partially consistent ideas, arguments, and considerations" (Zaller 1992, 36). However, most respondents probably don't recognize their own inconsistencies. The following occurs because they are unaware:

> A person may react angrily to a news report of welfare fraud and then, a few weeks later, become equally distressed over other news reports of impoverished children and homeless families. Thus, people may have

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

> one reaction to an issue that would cause them to favor it and another that would cause them to oppose it, but—and here is the heart of the argument—for most people, most of the time, there is no need to reconcile or even to recognize their contradictory reactions to events and issues. (Zaller 1992, 93)

Issue saliency will cause respondents to support and oppose the same policy at different points in time based on different considerations (Zaller 1992). Rather than dismissing the public as inconsistent "flip-floppers," it may be better to argue that the public is transconsistent. In Zaller's welfare example the same person has reasons to support welfare programs and reasons to oppose them. If it's impossible to create a completely fraud-proof system, then we are left with two options that we might be dissatisfied with. We can have a program that helps the needy, but some people will abuse the system and squander our tax dollars; or we can have no welfare program and some deserving needy people will go hungry. Neither of the two options may be what we want, and this is upsetting.

Alvarez and Brehm effectively add nuance to Zaller's insight. These contradictions occur because on some issues Americans might be ambivalent or equivocal. They argue that, "Ambivalence results when respondents' expectations or values are irreconcilable, such as we have demonstrated in the area of abortion policy for those respondents who believe both in a woman's right to autonomy over her body and that human life begins before birth" (Alvarez and Brehm 2002, 58). In addition, "Equivocation means literally to speak with two voices. . . . Equivocal respondents want both expectations (e.g., bureaucracies should be both responsive and equitable), but see no contradiction or trade-off between them" (Alvarez and Brehm 2002, 58). Not being able to perceive the contradiction does not mean that their two expectations aren't contradictory. Dialetheial paradoxes exist because on many issues Americans are ambivalent or equivocal. They want to have it both ways even though having it both ways is an impossibility.

It is more than just being inconsistent, however. There is an illiberal element to American public opinion. A majoritarian democracy would threaten our liberal democracy. Many Americans are perfectly willing to deny freedom of speech, or the right to vote, or to run for office to disfavored groups. McClosky and Zaller found that, "popular support for freedom of speech *in the abstract* is overwhelming," but in practice, "many Americans—and in some cases a majority—refuse to tolerate groups or ideas that they find threatening, offensive, or otherwise objectionable" (McClosky and Zaller

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

1984, 36). Whether it's communists, atheists, women, African Americans, or homosexuals, polls have found less support for disfavored groups having the same rights as favored groups.

Commitment to these values varies by levels of political knowledge. "Exposure to the elite political culture—whether measured by an individual's level of political knowledge, participation, or education—is significantly correlated with support for both clear democratic and clear capitalistic norms" (McClosky and Zaller 1984, 239). For McClosky and Zaller, that means that elites are stricter adherents to the ideological values of freedom and equality than the masses. A majoritarian democracy might very well threaten our individual liberties.

THE COMPETENT PUBLIC

Many authors argue that the public doesn't need to know everything in order to be politically competent, they just need to know enough or know someone who knows enough and use that person as a guide. By using heuristics, a rule of thumb or shortcut, voters can gain sufficient information to make competent decisions even if they are unable to answer some basic questions of political knowledge. Some also argue that while individual respondents are inconsistent, the aggregated preferences of the masses are both consistent and rational.

Ignorance. Samuel Popkin disagrees with the "non-attitudes" hypothesis. He states, "Voters may not have specific or even accurate knowledge about the details of legislation or public policy, but they have deeply held views that influence their reactions to public policy" (Popkin 1994, 106). He argues that voters have "low-information rationality" (Popkin 1994, 7). This occurs because voters use "information shortcuts and rules of thumb" to make rational decisions even with very limited information about the issues and candidates (Popkin 1994, 7). He is directly at odds with researchers who use the voters' lack of information to argue that voters can't make good decisions.

> It is certainly true that most citizens do not know many of the basic facts about their government, but assessing voters by civics exams misses the many things that voters *do* know, and the many ways in which they can do without the facts that the civics tradition assumes they should know. Further, the focus on voters' lack of textbook information about many political issues underestimates just how much information they pick up during campaigns and from conventions.

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

> This misinformation approach is a red herring. It focuses on what voters don't know instead of on what they do know, who they take their cues from, and how they read candidates. (Popkin 1994, 21)

Despite not knowing basic facts they can rely on opinion leaders to rapidly discern where they should stand on an issue. Individual voters come to trust certain elites with whom they largely agree, and when a new issue arises those elites can inform the voters without the voters having had to do any of the difficult information gathering themselves. They rely on elites to gather the information and take their cues from these trusted sources.

Stimson makes exactly this claim:

> Without any information flow whatsoever on the topic of politics (or just about anything else), one can form a view of what is good or bad simply by adopting the views of someone else who does pay attention. . . . If you adopt someone else's view of politics—and the view adopted was responsive to what was going on in Washington—then notwithstanding the broken line of cause and effect, *your view will be orderly and responsive to what really happened*. (Stimson 2015, 38)

Since elite opinion is more consistent and stable than mass opinion, when the masses follow elites mass opinion is also consistent and stable. If people simply parroted others' views and only had one source of information, this might hold true. So where do the heuristics come from?

Partisanship is one of the primary cues. It represents a running tally of past performance and voters take this into consideration when making decisions about who to support and what positions they should take. In addition, the candidate's race, religion, and gender can provide cues about the candidate's likely policy preferences. Endorsements of candidates by various groups and constituencies also send a signal to voters. Voters know they agree or disagree with certain groups so information about who those groups support provides information. Finally, voters care about more than just policy positions. They also care about character, trustworthiness, and competence. Voters might vote against a candidate that is more closely aligned with their own policy preferences if that candidate seems dishonest or incompetent. They might also do this if they are voting strategically. For example, they may vote for a less-preferred candidate in a primary if they believe that candidate has a better chance of success in the general election. This does not mean they voted for the "wrong" candidate. It means that trivia-type questions didn't fully measure what went into the voter's decision-making process (Popkin 1994).

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

Of course, even experts don't know everything, but "experts are better able to discriminate between relevant and irrelevant cues" (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 160). They are better able to determine which information shortcuts will aid in their decision-making process. This puts a damper on the heuristics argument for public competency. If the uninformed take their cues from unreliable sources, then heuristics won't substitute for actual knowledge. Lau and Redlawsk don't view this as a serious problem. They find that the typical voter votes correctly approximately 70 percent of the time. That is, they voted for the candidate they would have voted for under conditions of full information.

> This high level of correct voting certainly validates the efficiency of heuristic-based information processing that underlies our view of human nature. Moreover, it challenges those critics who hold that democracies' problems stem primarily from people not having the motivation to gather the information to be able to figure out what is in their best interest. Most people, most of the time, can make this calculation, at least in presidential elections. (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 86)

For Lau and Redlawsk this is good enough, indeed it may be better than having more information. "At least in politics, more information does not always result in better decisions. In fact, it often results in worse decisions" (Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 218). Because human beings have limited cognitive abilities and limited memory abilities, they can experience information overload. They find that a deep information search performs less well than a shallow information search when it comes to selecting the correct candidate (Lau and Redlawsk 2006).

They acknowledge, however, that those 30 percent of voters who voted incorrectly do not make random mistakes—it's not a coin toss, at least not exactly. Because voters are influenced by what they can remember at the time of making the decision they can be influenced by campaign advertising. Recalling Zaller's "top of the head" responses, we know that issue saliency can impact a voter's choice. By making one issue more salient than another, or more easily remembered at the time the vote is cast, campaigns can get voters to vote against the voter's own stated preferences. If a voter prefers heads and tails equally, or dislikes both equally but is bombarded with pro-heads advertising for two weeks before they make their choice, there will be a greater probability of choosing heads.

Modern campaigns have become very adept at microtargeting. In today's information age, data about Internet searches, television programs watched, purchases made, and demographic variables are readily available to advertisers

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

who seek to sell their products or services to those that are most likely to purchase their wares. The advertisements people are exposed to on the Internet, cable television, and satellite radio are not random. They are targeted at specific costumers. People who search for a new car online get advertisements from automobile manufactures and local car dealers. People who look at real estate online receive advertisements from mortgage companies, furniture stores, moving companies, and remodeling companies. Campaign strategists from both major parties have access to the same information that any other potential advertiser has.

Democratic campaign professionals know that a white Republican woman who drives a Prius and lives with an African American man is easier to persuade to vote Democratic than a white Republican man who lives in rural Nebraska and holds a hunting license. Republican campaign professionals know that a white Democratic man who is a union member, lives in the rust belt, has only a high school degree, and visits Alt-Right websites is easier to persuade to vote Republican than an African American Democrat who lives in Boston, has a PhD, and is a member of the Sierra Club. Knowing what they know, today's campaign professionals can target *individuals* to receive precisely the message that will get them to flip their usual vote choice. They can send that person ten pieces of direct mail, call them five times, and purchase ads that will appear when they watch their favorite program. Furthermore, this bombardment has precisely the effect it is supposed to have. People, who would by ordinary measures tend to vote for one party, in fact vote for the party that does not align with their overall stated preferences. In 2004, George W. Bush's presidential campaign developed and sent out a piece of direct mail to a group of three hundred voters. Why put so much effort into such a small mailing? Because those three hundred voters have exactly the right characteristics to suggest that they might be John Kerry voters with a high propensity to vote for Bush, if Bush tells them the right thing. With five hundred voters here and one thousand voters over there, each being microtargeted, election outcomes can be changed. The Bush campaign "made it a priority of knowing how to rile up a voter who stood with Bush on only a single issue" (Issenberg 2016, 140).

> Minnesotans who received federal farm subsidies were almost certain to get a piece of mail arguing that Bush's free-trade position would not damage the state's sugar beet economy. . . . Moderate Republicans in the Philadelphia suburbs learned about Bush's support for the Clean Skies Initiative, which the campaign presented as a policy of pragmatic environmentalism. (Issenberg 2016, 139)

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

Today's campaign professionals make a living knowing how to persuade potential voters in the same way that advertisers know how to persuade potential customers.

Those who don't understand real-world on-the-ground politicking might very well analyze a particular voter's survey responses and find that on nine issues the voter supports John Kerry's position and on one issue they support George W. Bush's position. If that voter cast his vote for Bush, they would conclude the voter made the wrong choice. The reality is that the voter might have been subject to a microtargeting campaign and made their vote choice on the one issue that they were bombarded with advertisements on. There is nothing nefarious about the practice or anything "wrong" about the vote choice. On Election Day that one issue was the single most important thing on the mind of that voter, who selected the option he or she most preferred at the time. Wrong choices on ballots refer to inaccuracies in the data collection process, like a voter who attempts to vote for Al Gore, but accidently votes for George Bush because the holes on the butterfly ballot don't line up next the correct name.

Partisanship, like religious affiliation, may be a core part of one's social identification. It structures one's values, preferences, and allegiances. But, "One may vote for a Republican candidate and yet feel part of a Democratic team" (Green, et al. 2002, 8). Some voters do switch their partisan vote choice from one election to the next, even if their own party ID remains constant. It may not be many voters that do this, but if a small number in closely contested districts and states do switch, it can change electoral outcomes and transfer control of the government from one party to the other. Partisan allegiances may be very strong, but they are not static. Effective campaigns can find the exact individuals that are the most likely to switch and compel them to do that very thing. Blue-collar whites who live in the rust belt are typically Democratic voters, but in 2016 enough of those voters abandoned the Democrats to support Republican Donald Trump to change the electoral map (Brownstein 2017). When the margins are narrow, a small number of vote switchers in a few key places can make all the difference.

One reason why voters seem incompetent is nothing more than a relic of the fact that individuals are both persuadable and pragmatic. Popkin is correct when he says campaigns matter. The reason people are dissatisfied is because circumstances change. In the first example above, our Bush voter will soon find he disapproves of the president's performance because, as those nine other issues become more salient, he opposes Bush's positions. We could argue that this voter should have known better, but many people have a mix of liberal

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

and conservative positions. Sometimes they are on both sides of one issue and will be dissatisfied no matter who they vote for or what policy the government enacts. This helps explain, at least in part, why the president's party loses seats during midterm elections.

Since the beginning of the Democratic and Republican two-party system, starting in 1862, the president's party has typically lost seats in the House and Senate in midterm elections. There have been only 3 exceptions in those 76 consecutive midterm elections. In 1934, the popular FDR saw his Democratic majority increase in the House and Senate. In 1998, Republican impeachment efforts backfired and Clinton's Democrats gained seats in the House and broke even in the Senate, neither gaining nor losing seats. In 2002, not long after the 9/11 attacks, Bush's Republicans gained seats in both the House and Senate. These exceptions can be explained because they occurred during major and unusual events in our society—the Great Depression, a presidential impeachment hearing, and a foreign attack on American soil. If the public were "flipping a coin" each election cycle, there would be no pattern at all. Half the time the president would gain seats and half the time the president would lose seats. In reality, after selecting a head there is 96 percent probability of selecting a tail next. Some argue that this is explained by the larger turnout in presidential as opposed to midterm elections. The larger turnout election brings in more minority voters and gives Democrats an advantage. The smaller turnout election is disproportionally white and this favors Republicans. But this doesn't explain why the phenomena affects both parties. When the larger turnout favors Republicans (2004), the smaller turnout favored Democrats (2006). It's clearly not a coin toss if there is a predictable pattern and turnout doesn't consistently favor one party over the other. There's something deeper going on.

The evidence is clear, most Americans can't identify which party is in control of Congress (Somin 2016). Yet, they almost always vote against the president's party after supporting that party two years earlier. They seem to almost always want the opposite of what they previously selected. They do know which party controls the White House, they know some basic differences between the two parties, and for many scholars that's enough information for voters to competently choose a candidate.

Lupia, for example, also argues that the public is competent. Just because Americans can't correctly answer survey questions that ask about political facts, this does not mean they are "incompetent when formulating political opinions or casting important votes" (Lupia 2016, 9). He makes two important claims. The first is that not all information is useful and that incorrect information can actually reduce one's level of knowledge. The second is that one doesn't need

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

to know everything in order to be competent. As long as the person knows enough of the necessary facts they can make a good decision. The problem with traditional lists of what a voter should know is that they don't really measure the items that make a person politically competent. Because a "cue is a piece of information that can take the place of other information as the basis of competence at a particular task" people can use cues to replace information they don't have. True, they may not be able to correctly answer some trivia-type questions about American politics, but they can use shortcuts to make the correct decisions. If they know some basic policy differences between Democrats and Republicans and they are given information about which candidates represent each political party, as most general election ballots provide, they have enough information to make a competent decision. His research suggests that, "voters who appear to be uninformed can cast the same votes they would have cast if they had access to very detailed information" (Lupia 2016, 52).

Lupia makes a critical error when he defines values as "concepts or beliefs about desirable end states or behaviors that transcend specific situations" (Lupia 2016, 110). He says, "Values provide a structure that helps to organize a person's attitudes and preferences. Because values are more general and held more deeply than many attitudes or preferences, they also tend to be more resistant to change (Lupia 2016, 112). Unfortunately for Lupia, there is ample evidence to suggest that values are highly transitory and fleeting, they do depend significantly on the situation. Different values come into play in different circumstances so that values are much less a guiding force than an ex post rationalization for a preferred option. If it's true that most Americans are pragmatists, then most Americans aren't being driven by a core set of values. Some pragmatists do and believe whatever is expedient in a particular situation. Change the situation and their values change as well. They use values to justify a preferred choice, often to hide self-interested behavior behind a veneer of moral righteousness.

Confederate apologists often argue that the Civil War was not about slavery, it was about state's rights. They believe, as a matter of principle, that states should be free to make the laws that best suit their local circumstances. Prior to the Civil War, Ohio had passed a law granting freedom to any slave that made it into Ohio's jurisdiction. Southerners fought strongly for the Fugitive Slave Act, an act that would overrule state laws and impose federal mandates on states that prefer not to return fugitive slaves (Gerstle 2015). If it's a matter of principle, why didn't southern states defend Ohio's sovereignty over a tyrannical federal government? The answer is simple. Our "core values" are nothing more than excuses for achieving our desired ends. As such they

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

can't be used to guide policy preferences. Many pragmatists decide what is expedient and then justify or rationalize their choice.

Consistency. While Converse and others found that respondents are inconsistent, Page and Shapiro argue that "over a period of time, each individual will have a central tendency of opinion, which might be called the 'true' or *long-term preference*, and which can be ascertained by averaging the opinions expressed by the same individual at several different times" (Page and Shapiro 1992, 16). This is the miracle of aggregation. If a person chooses vanilla ice cream 90 percent of the time and chocolate ice cream 10 percent of the time, it would be fair to say the person prefers vanilla ice cream. Stimson argues that public opinion isn't arbitrary or capricious, if one studies public opinion on particular issues over time, one finds that change is slow and steady. While individual respondents might be flip-flopping from one survey iteration to the next, the overall picture is a slow progression of opinion change in one direction rather than rapid changes in both directions (Stimson 2015).

Stimson, like Caplan, alludes to a transconsistent public. He finds that, "Americans on average are symbolically conservative and operationally liberal" (Stimson 2015, 98). This means, in essence, Americans are ideologically conservative but pragmatically liberal. His research demonstrates that over 20 percent of Americans are what he calls "conflicted conservatives" (Stimson 2015, 103). "Lots of people," he says, "think of themselves as conservatives and act like liberals" (Stimson 2015, 103). They are not ideological in the sense of being strong adherents to conservative principles, they actually prefer liberal policies, but the conservative value system resonates with this subset of the population and they identify with it. This means they can be wooed to vote for conservative politicians, but when that politician begins to implement their conservative agenda they will recoil because it isn't what they wanted—they wanted liberal policies. So why didn't they vote for liberal candidates in the first place? Well, they will in the next election. But, once liberal policies are being enacted, they will recoil because it violates their preferred set of values. The typical trope is that they are inconsistent, but this group, in fact, wants both—and they are continuously disappointed when they don't get both. They get one and attempt to rectify the situation by choosing the other the first chance they get.

We're left with a methodological question. The methods used by Stimson and Page and Shapiro demonstrate that the public is consistent. The methods used by Converse, Zaller, and Althaus demonstrate the public is inconsistent. It seems that Page and Shapiro make two critical mistakes. First, they argue

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

that respondents who give flippant or inconsistent answers to survey questions don't pose a serious problem, "so long as they are scattered randomly across the population" (Page and Shapiro 1992, 28). These respondents would cancel each other out and not impact majority opinion. But what if they are not scattered randomly? Or, even worse, what if the "wrong" people cancel each other out? If uninformed people answer randomly, because they don't know what they are talking about, then the majority decision will reflect the opinions of the informed population. The problem is that the most highly informed and knowledgeable people on political matters are also the most ideological. Conservative ideologues and liberal ideologues will cancel each other out and majority opinion will rest on the subset of the population that knows the least about the question at hand. Both Althaus and Caplan are correct, there is systemic bias—the least informed do not answer randomly. In addition, the least informed tend to prefer different policies than the most informed, while the most informed split along ideological lines. We end up with policies being driven by the most ignorant among us. More than that, they prefer and don't prefer the policies they choose.

The second mistake made by Page and Shapiro is to eliminate the framing effect in their methodology. "Framing effects occur whenever altering the formulation of a problem, or shifting the point of view of an observer, changes the information and ideas the observer will use when making decisions" (Popkin 1994, 82). Because this occurs Page and Shapiro argue that, "The only safe way to identify opinion change . . . is to compare answers to *identical survey questions*" (Page and Shapiro 1992, 28). This eliminates the question wording and framing effects. Of course, the public will be consistent when you eliminate the very thing that would cause them to give a different answer. The problem is that the real world doesn't work that way. The way a question is phrased or framed does impact the response and politicians have become very adept at using the words that will elicit their preferred response from the public. Liberals and conservatives who oppose each other on a particular policy can both elicit majority support for their mutually exclusive positions. It is by comparing different questions that we can see that the public is often on two sides of the same debate.

Stimson's own research demonstrates that dialetheial paradoxes exist in public opinion. The public is transconsistent.

> Because both sides of the puzzle are reliably true, commentators on both sides of American politics can always make the case about the "real" America, even while disagreeing fiercely with one another.

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany

> Look at symbolic ideology, and it is true that conservatism dominates liberalism. Look at preferences for what government does, and it is true that preferences most of the time favor more rather than less. (Stimson 2015, 98)

Stimson is transconsistent when he says Americans are "pragmatic ideologues" (Stimson 2015, 178). Pragmatists, as I'll review in chapter 3, don't have ideological values. Stimson's case for consistency in public opinion is to argue that the public is consistently inconsistent. It would be better to argue that the public is transconsistent—they want two contradictory things at the same time. It's a subtle but important distinction.

VALUE PLURALISM

The argument made here goes one step further than Stimson's and fully embraces value pluralism. Value pluralism refers to the claim that "fundamental values are plural, conflicting, incommensurable in theory, and uncombinable in practice" (Galston 2002, 30). The concept was first developed by Isaiah Berlin who noticed that, "not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another" (Berlin 1991, 8). This could create conflict between civilizations but more important for our purposes here is the observation that "Values may easily clash within the breast of a single individual" (Berlin 1991, 12). Value pluralism recognizes, "the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another" (Berlin 1969, 171). This creates an internal struggle between competing ethical goods that is not easily, if ever, resolved.

Some theorists advocate using different values to make judgments on different issues (Walzer 1983). This can become a serious problem when motivated reasoning occurs. Individuals might selectively use various ethical principles to justify a self-serving end. They may use a particular value to justify a self-serving action and reject that same value when others benefit (Lebo and Cassino 2007; Kunda 1990; Lodge and Taber 2013). Instances of motivated reasoning are prevalent in our political system. For example, "Under President George W. Bush, Democratic senators aggressively defended the use of the filibuster, while Republican senators vigorously opposed it. Under President Barack Obama, the two sides essentially flipped. Republican senators vigorously defended the use of the filibuster, which was sharply opposed by Democrats" (Posner and Sunstein 2015, 2). Or, "Consider a lawsuit brought by

© 2018 State University of New York Press, Albany