From the Folk Theory to Symbolic Politics: Toward a More Realistic Understanding of Voter Behavior

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ABSTRACT: *Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels's* Democracy for Realists *makes a persuasive case that standard theories of democracy rest on shaky empirical ground, and that optimistically interpreted empirical findings about public competence do not save the day. However, I argue that the solution does not lie with theories of elite competition or accountability to other institutions. Instead, I turn to theories of symbolic politics. These theories capture the empirical reality of how voters engage with politics and make decisions. While they tend to emphasize human irrationality, they also contain the potential for a symbolic kind of rationality that could provide a solid foundation for democratic politics.*

Keywords: *Christopher Achen; Larry Bartels; Murray Edelman; group identity; social identity; symbolic politics.*

Christopher H. Achen and Larry M. Bartels begin *Democracy for Realists* with a critique of what they call the "folk theory of democracy." The folk theory is a distillation of various views of democracy that, while recognizing the limits of citizens' capacities, suggests that the public can and does fulfill its democratic function well enough. According to the folk theory, the public can, and does, hold government accountable for

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its actions. Thus, government is of, by, and for the people. *Democracy for Realists* adduces secondary and primary evidence that this theory is simply wrong. First, most people do not care enough about politics to give it much thought. Second, politics is not a domain in which most people calculate and maximize their utility. Rather, they tend to pick up bits and pieces of information about the political world, just enough to generate a few vivid "pictures in their heads," to paraphrase Walter Lippmann (1922). On the irregular occasions when they do tune in to political developments, most people tend to proceed in ways that violate the assumptions of rationality—even bounded rationality. And so, the book argues, the folk theory has begun to collapse in the face of social science. I would say that this book stands to accelerate that collapse with an avalanche of argument and evidence.

Of course, scholars of public opinion have long suspected that for most people, politics is "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann 1922, 29). And the empirical debate about the competence of the public has been raging since at least 1964, with the publication of Philip E. Converse's indictment of the public as knowing little and thinking even less (1964). For each bright spot that folk theorists have painted in their picture of public competence, critics have found a shadow. The apparent rise in engagement during the turbulent 1960s turned out to be a measurement artifact (Bishop et al. 1978). Cues and heuristics are ubiquitous enough to potentially provide an elegant remedy, and under very specific conditions they do simulate well-informed choices (Lupia 1994); but in practice, it's those who least need them who use them effectively (Lau and Redlawsk 2001). Citizens may care little about most issues but a lot about one or two issues (Converse 1964); that still leaves the vast majority of the citizenry incapacitated on most of the consequential issues. The promise of citizen deliberation (Chambers 2012; Fishkin 1991; Habermas 1996) is far more problematic than early hopes had led us to expect (Karpowitz and Mendelberg 2014; Mansbridge 1983). Finally, the "miracle of aggregation," by which individually ignorant choices cancel out (Page and Shapiro 1992), is miraculous only for the wealthy and powerful and those who happen to share their preferences (Bartels 1988; Gilens 2012), and leaves untouched biases common across individuals.

What is new in *Democracy for Realists* is the systematic dismantling of the folk theory. This is an assault theoretical and empirical in equal measure, and one that stands as perhaps the most devastating to date. The book not

only uses shark attacks in an empirical demonstration that the public does not hold officials accountable in a reasonable fashion; it launches a shark attack against the folk theory of democracy. Voters do not hold officials accountable for their actual actions, or for actions they realistically could undertake to solve public problems. Nor do voters formulate preferences over policies and choose the officials most likely to implement those policies. Instead, voters seem to act capriciously, almost superstitiously, out of some tribal, even primal, sense of who lives in their cave and who threatens from the next cave over.

In what follows, I develop a response to this argument. My point will be that *Democracy for Realists* could make productive use of theories of symbolic politics.

How Not to Respond to Achen and Bartels

First, I'll step around some easy solutions. I won't say that the folk theory is defensible despite the public's cognitive deficits because: (a) elites compete, or because (b) elites are checked and balanced, or because (c) elites act as if the public will rationally hold them accountable. Briefly, those arguments are:

(a) *Competing elites*: The opposition party or candidate is incentivized to compete, and in a free polity, it does so effectively. The fact that voters are not rational and do not hold officials accountable is no reason to declare democracy a dead idea. Democracy ultimately boils down to healthy competition between competing elites in a robust party system, à la Schattschneider (1960). Perhaps surprisingly, *Democracy for Realists* hangs its own democratic hat on this peg. Ultimately, Achen and Bartels do not want to condemn all defenses of democracy. The case they make for the desirability of democracy is that while voters do not make democracy work, elites do. However, in the tradition of other "elitist" theories of democracy, this leaves the heart and soul of democracy—the people— entirely out of the picture (cf. Pateman 1970).

(b) "*Horizontal accountability*" (O'Donnell 1998): A functioning polity rests on checks and balances (Madison [1778] 1961). Those are built-in features of a system that operates independently of voters and their foibles. Elites whose institutional roles direct them to monitor and check officials provide horizontal accountability: As long as a polity has a free press and other institutions providing incentives to some individuals to monitor and punish governing officials, we may be OK.

(c) *Elite anticipation:* Even though voters are not rational, elites act as if they are. They pay attention to public opinion polls, and act to pre-empt voters' wrath (Canes-Wrone 2010). They crave electoral reward and fear punishment at the ballot box (Arnold 1992; Ashworth and Bueno de Mesquita 2014; Mayhew 1974). They especially worry about how an opponent could portray their actions to mobilize voter disapproval at election time. In that sense, the system is accountable and responsive.

The problem with each of these solutions is that they give up on the public. Thus, they dovetail with the elitist conclusion of the book. They grant the point that voters are not competent even in a limited sense. They turn to an institutional definition—and defense—of democracy, according to which elites are the ones who make the system accountable, not voters. I am not ready to concede that much, however, and so I will go a different route.

I'll also set aside the main competing theories that attempt to rehabilitate the public. These are: (a) the public uses heuristics to arrive at as–if-rational decisions much of the time, by using cues from the parties or interest groups they like, and efficient cognitive shortcuts to assess the performance of incumbents; (b) many voters are members of one or two issue publics, they know a lot about those issues, they vote based on those issues, and the political system functions just fine that way; (c) more opportunities for citizens to participate in deliberative forums can rehabilitate public competence; and (d) the public is rational in the aggregate, and government responds to the clear signal it emits amidst the noise of canceled individual errors.

Achen and Bartels consider each of these responses and persuasively rebut them.

System 1 and Symbolic Politics

Instead, I want to consider a different perspective on the problem, grounded in theories of symbolic politics (Edelman 1964; Sears 1993). As developed by Murray Edelman, this theory rests on the concept of "condensation symbols." These are signals that evoke "patriotic pride, anxieties, remembrances of past glories or humiliations, promises of future greatness," and similar emotion-driven notions (Edelman 1964, 5). I would add that often, these notions implicate one or another of a person's social identity groups. Symbols call up charged visions of what kind of behavior counts as proper and good in the eyes of society.

They represent broad expectations about the appropriate status of ingroups and outgroups.

A variation on this idea emerges from the work of David O. Sears (1993). Sears postulated that people tend to relate to politics through simple, affectively charged social symbols that are activated by a corresponding message. People who identify as American resonate with pride to the American flag as a symbol of their attachment to the nation; ethnocentric whites react with fierce anger to the image of a black man seeking to rule over them (Tesler and Sears 2010); native-borns experience disgust at the thought of ethnic foreigners living nearby (Aarøe, Petersen, and Arceneaux 2017).

The big theoretical payoff of Sears's framework is to contrast the symbolic against the concrete (Kinder and Sears 1981; Sears, Hensler, and Speer 1979; Sears and Funk 1991; Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen 1980). Theories of issue-voting and accountability-voting essentially assume that citizens are not only rational, but oriented to the concrete. They are instrumental. They are using their political involvement to seek resources: jobs, income, wealth, land, or economic opportunity. They see politics as a means to those ends. By contrast, Sears and his colleagues have argued that these motives are seldom at play in politics, and that in their stead, we observe intangible motivations. Citizens are less driven by the desire to fatten their pocketbooks, grow their businesses, or protect their home values, than by the imperative of growing their national stature abroad and protecting their social ingroups' values (Citrin and Green 1990).

Theories of symbolic politics are supported by the last few decades of research in behavioral and cognitive psychology (Bargh 1994; Chaiken 1980; Eagly and Chaiken 1993; Paivio 2007; Petty and Cacioppo 1986; Strack and Deutsch 2004). At the risk of simplifying a complex set of findings and theories, the basic idea is that people process information and make decisions through two separate systems, System 1 and System 2 (to use Kahneman's terminology; Kahneman 2011). System 1 is physiologically anchored in the older part of the brain that we share with other mammals, while System 2 resides primarily in the newer frontal cortex, which is unique to humans. System 1 is the gut-reaction system. It is quick, emotional, intuitive, relies on associations of incoming stimuli with familiar concepts and old habits, and operates outside of conscious awareness. Thus, it requires little effort; but it also offers little self-control. System-1 processes rely on simple associations from

memory, frequently practiced habits, standard operating procedures, social scripts, feelings, and stereotypes of groups. System 1 generates immediate, simple, snap decisions. It is highly efficient, but possibly more open to error. System 2 is the reasoning system. It is slow, logical, deliberate, conscious, explicit, effortful, and under the control of the executive self. It seeks relevant, objective evidence, and relies on logic, deep thinking, and more extensive calculation. System 2 attempts to achieve longer-term goals, and is relatively accurate, at the cost of requiring significant time, effort, and other resources. When the environment is simple, familiar, and safe, System 1 tends to come into play. When it is complex, unusual, new, or dangerous, System 2 takes over.

Achen and Bartels's critique of issue and accountability voting is a demonstration that voters are not System-2 actors. Instead, they look a lot like creatures of System 1, who suffer the biases predictable when one over-relies on available glimpses of the world and simplistic rules of thumb.

Symbolic Politics and Shark Attacks

That most people are System-1 decision-makers opens the door to theories of symbolic politics. In symbolic theories, elites do not use communication to signal policy positions or claim credit and deflect blame for the conditions that voters live in. Rather, they use communication to evoke anger, disgust, fear, enthusiasm, hope, or empowerment.

Given the affinity between theories of symbolic politics and the System 1 process, it's worth looking more closely at how voters engage emotionally, intuitively, outside of conscious awareness, in quick bursts of attention; and how leaders cue these emotions and intuitions and channel them to political ends. In that sense, theories of symbolic politics can fill the gap left by the disintegration of the folk theory of issue and accountability voting.

The big item for the scholarly agenda would then be to consider how often, and in what ways, this process leads to voters' long-term strategic detriment. But a case for long-term strategic health is also possible, roughly as follows.

Consider "blind retrospection," a key concept offered up by Achen and Bartels. By this, they mean that voters reward and punish leaders for conditions completely beyond human control. While the folk theory argues that voters are rational-enough in holding officials accountable, because, for example, they can use simple retrospection to review

the price at the gas pump or the toll of a foreign war, *Democracy for Realists* argues instead that voters review irrelevant conditions such as shark attacks, droughts, and floods, over which public officials are powerless. Thus, retrospective accountability is no accountability at all, because voters toss out incumbents in bad times or keep them on in good times regardless of what the incumbents could do to bring good or bad times into existence.

However, from the optimistic perspective, while blind retrospection is blind at the concrete level, it is not necessarily blind at the symbolic level.

Let's take the case of the 1916 shark attacks that depressed Woodrow Wilson's presidential vote share along the Jersey Shore. The attacks' economic fallout could not have been realistically addressed by the federal government a century ago. That was simply beyond the scope of what government did then. In that sense, it was unreasonable for voters to hold Wilson accountable for failing to help stanch the economic bleeding. However, Wilson also symbolically signaled indifference to the plight of the Shore. Although he was petitioned to send in the Coast Guard to hunt sharks, the Coast Guard never did undertake a shark-killing campaign (Capuzzo 2002, 278). Wilson's public response amounted to holding a cabinet meeting. By contrast, New Jersey governor James Fielder "offered bounties for those hunting sharks, prompting an armada of boats patrolling the coast" (Ritter 2016), and oversaw what some characterized as "the largest scale animal hunt in history" (Fernicola 2016, 67). If Wilson had launched an armada of boats on a hunt of historic proportions, shark attacks would have been unaffected, but he would have signaled that he cared. To be sure, shark attacks, and many other disasters, cannot be prevented by anyone, however stellar their leadership may be. But leaders can communicate, in vivid ways that engage the System-1 process, that they are aware of the problem, that they care deeply about it, that they are doing something that might help. The grand gesture is a symbol of a leader's priorities. According to the positive view of symbolic politics, it is reasonable for voters to listen to and respond to these kinds of cues about a leader's level of engagement and understanding of their concerns.

Symbolic Politics and Social Identity

A contemporary example of symbolic politics is Donald Trump's border wall. Some voters may have expected Trump to actually build a wall, on

the intuition that the wall would reduce the number of undocumented immigrants from Mexico. That would be the instrumental, concrete way to view Trump's rhetoric. Such a perspective fits within the models of issue voting and retrospective accountability that form the folk theory of democracy. But some voters may have processed the message about the wall through System-1 channels. The wall is a symbol, not a policy promise. Trump's emphasis on a wall signaled his priority: native-born Americans first, foreigners last, far down the hierarchy. The symbolic wall displays the alignment of his sensibilities with those of Americans anxious or angered by third-world immigration. By emphasizing the problems supposedly brought on by undocumented immigration, and promising to do something big and bold about them, he displayed his authentic engagement with Americans who feel that illegal immigration poses a threat to their vision of American culture and to their status within their country. The wall signals Trump's general commitment to the primacy of Anglo-Americans and their distinctive ways of life. That's a promise he seems dedicated to deliver on, whether or not he builds a wall. As some observers have put it, Trump's supporters may not take him literally, but they take him seriously (Zito 2016). The wall is a condensation symbol representing a commitment to emotionally resonant notions of ethnocentrism.

I would offer a guess that many voters expect leaders to feel as the voter does about group-based visions of who is deserving and who is a threat. For example, many of Trump's supporters know that he is not one of them in his religious beliefs, his class background, or other markers of social identity. But they probably got the symbolic message that he feels the way they do on core concerns that arise from their social identity.

Thus, theories of symbolic politics take up where *Democracy for Realists* leaves off. Voters don't typically vote based on whether or not leaders actually deliver the goods, nor based on their likelihood of doing so. They don't use cues to figure out who has brought about which policy. Rather, they respond to political messages as condensation symbols, with the evoked emotions of anger, or fear, or disgust, or enthusiasm, using them to intuit who is their political friend or foe, which stereotypes to bring to bear, and so on.

Is this type of retrospection effective in producing government responsiveness? Does it translate into accountability? If so, it could be a reasonable voting strategy.

Edelman was skeptical of the value of symbolic politics. If voters proceed symbolically, they leave the real business of politics—producing policy, channeling costs and benefits to some and not others—to elites. Symbols distract the public, and serve as expressive but ineffectual outlets for discontent. And Edelman may have been right. For example, Tasha Philpot has shown that the Republican National Committee placed television cameras next to a small handful of African Americans present at the 2004 Republican National Convention to convey the misimpression that the party was supported by many African Americans (2007). In this case, the symbolic visuals of African-American Republican activists would lead voters to the wrong decision.

Sometimes, however, symbols may help people arrive at the right decision. That is, people may use symbols to reach decisions that align with their central, identity-linked predispositions. If so, the process would conform to John Zaller's criteria of democratically desirable decisions (Zaller 1992). An example of this is the case of abortion. *Democracy for Realists* shows that many women switched parties when the parties aligned on opposite sides of the abortion controversy, choosing the party that matched their own position. (By contrast, pro-choice *men* changed their attitudes about *abortion* to align with the position of their *party*). If this process was facilitated not by reading party platforms but by symbolic signals, by reliance on System-1 feelings, habits of mind, and emotionally resonant cues to values, then perhaps symbols can help people line up their social identity with the correct political choice. In support of this idea, Michael Tesler's study shows that leaders who focus sustained attention on resonant social identities prime these predispositions in people's political choices (Tesler 2015).

How generalizable these anecdotes are, and how frequently symbols mislead, are important research questions, even if difficult ones to study. I have offered these examples to suggest a productive direction for future research. The agenda consists of two steps, in sequence: first, accepting the conclusions of *Democracy for Realists*, and then building a theory of public opinion that takes seriously not only social identity, as do Achen and Bartels, but the relative insignificance of the concrete and the instrumental, and the primacy of symbolic politics. This approach would clarify the difference between issues (or ideology) on the one hand, and simple associations, emotions, and identity on the other. It would explain why, for ordinary people, politics is about the latter, not the former.

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