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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Richard T. Longoria

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**Janus Democracy:  
Transconsistency and the General Will**

**Richard T. Longoria**

**The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley**

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## Preface

A few years back I was having a conversation with an older gentleman, let's call him Jim. The conversation turned to politics and Jim told me that he's upset with our government's out of control spending. He wanted the government to balance the budget. I told Jim that Medicare is the fastest growing area of government expenditures and asked him if he would favor a reduction in Medicare spending. He strongly opposed the suggestion and said, "I don't want rationing." He wanted unlimited healthcare because he'd likely need it in the coming years. He volunteered a program that he wanted cut, he said, "We need to get rid of welfare." I didn't quibble, he proposed a reduction in spending which would move him closer to his stated policy preference. But I did tell him that eliminating welfare would not balance the budget on its own, we could eliminate all welfare spending and we would still be over-budget. I asked him about military spending. That is an area that takes up a very large proportion of the federal budget. He said, "We need to increase spending on the military. We have to be prepared for the terrorists." I told him increasing spending would not balance the budget. He replied, "We can use the money we saved from welfare." Alright. The savings from welfare gets transferred to the military budget. I informed Jim that we are now over-budget by the same amount we started at. I asked, "Are there any other programs you want to see cut?" He replied, "I don't know." It's was an honest answer.

The other way to balance the budget is with additional revenues. I asked him if he would support tax increases. He replied, "Absolutely not!" Knowing that most Americans are willing to support tax increases on the wealthy, I presented him that option. He said, "We shouldn't punish the job creators." I said, "Jim that doesn't balance the budget." He replied, "I don't have the solutions. That's why smart people like you should find them." My conversation with Jim is

important because he is fairly typical. He has policy preferences, but they are not well developed. When they are combined they don't yield the results that Jim himself would prefer. How do our elected officials deal with voters like Jim? The answer is that our political elites and our political institutions do a very good job of reflecting the Will of the People.

Most Americans want the deficit reduced and the federal budget to be balanced. Our political leaders made an earnest effort to develop a plan to accomplish this objective. The Bowles-Simpson Commission was a bipartisan committee that created a plan to balance the federal budget. In some sense it is a simple problem. We have to reduce expenditures, increase revenues, or some combination of the two. The plan included cuts to national defense and Medicare, along with other reductions throughout the federal budget. In addition, the plan called for a variety of tax increases, including Social Security and gasoline tax increases. It called for reductions in tax deductions, like the mortgage interest deduction, aimed at increasing federal revenues. If fully implemented, the plan would balance the federal budget. This would seem like precisely the type of plan most Americans would support, except they don't. The Bowles-Simpson plan was abandoned because Republicans opposed the tax increases and Democrats opposed the reductions to Medicare and other programs. Most Americans support the Republican Party's commitment to lower taxes and a smaller government with fewer services. Most Americans also support the Democratic Party's opposition to reductions in favored programs and their support for higher taxes on the wealthy to pay for the programs. It is a true reflection of the "general will" to propose a plan that most Americans would support and to abandon that same plan because most Americans would oppose it. Jim wants us to balance the budget, but he will oppose cuts to national defense and Medicare and will oppose any tax increases on principle. He would oppose the plan to balance the budget. In a very real sense Jim

has exactly the government that he wants. The problem is he doesn't like it. More than that, he's angry about it. He's tired of the gridlock. He's frustrated by it. He wants solutions. When a solution is offered he gets angrier. Why is the government proposing solutions that he doesn't like? He concludes that the government isn't listening to him. When candidates like Donald Trump say, "Our leaders are stupid." Jim agrees. We can feel sorry for Jim because of his lack of understanding, but we must also have some sympathy for our public officials. There isn't a solution that the public will like. The public is angry because of our problems. They want the problems fixed and they oppose the solutions.

More recently, I presented my students with a short video clip of the recent military coup in Egypt. After the coup, violence erupted when the military called for a vote on the new constitution. I asked my class, should the U.S. intervene in Egypt's internal political conflicts? One student immediately said, "No, it's not our job." The violence occurred because the Muslim Brotherhood, which had won the previous election by majority vote, was now banned from participating in the constitutional election because the military, with U.S. support, declared the Brotherhood a terrorist organization. The Muslim Brotherhood claimed to be a legitimate political party and, more than that, democratically elected by popular vote. I asked the student, "So you want the Muslim Brotherhood to take over?" The student quickly replied, "No." The student has an opinion about U.S. intervention in foreign conflict – it's not our problem. The student also has an opinion about terrorist groups – we need to stop them. Within a matter of seconds opposition to U.S. intervention morphed into support for U.S. intervention. In politics we call that a flip-flop, I inquired further, "So you now think it's a good idea for the U.S. to intervene in Egypt?" The reply, "No." He hadn't abandoned the first opinion, he just added a second contradictory one. "There's no good options," he finished.



This sincere desire for two contradictory and incompatible goals is called *transconsistency*. I argue that this transconsistency stems from the pragmatic nature of Americans' worldview. Pragmatism is anti-foundational, it lacks a core set of absolute principles. This is true for most Americans. This isn't to say we don't have ideologues, we certainly do, but rabid ideologues are not common and most Americans can be both liberal and conservative. The philosophy of William James and the pragmatists has become part of the American Ethos, even though most Americans have never heard of him. His type of pragmatism leads to precisely the dialetheial paradoxes that Graham Priest has postulated. A dialetheial paradox occurs when a statement and the negation of that statement are both true. In public opinion it occurs when a majority wants and doesn't want a particular policy.

Jim wants a balanced budget as a matter of principle. He also opposes tax increases as a matter of principle. More practically he is scared by terrorism and wants increased expenditures to keep him safe. He needs healthcare and opposes any limits to the amount that will be spent on providing for the services that he will need to live a longer life. He doesn't have the money himself but he does feel the government should provide him with these services. Jim will never be satisfied because there isn't a viable solution that Jim would ever support.

Being uninformed is part of the public's problem. Without accurate information, the public prefers policies that don't produce what the public desires. But the issue is deeper than just simple ignorance. Americans have contradictory and incompatible preferences. What is truly remarkable about the American political system with its federalism and its checks and balances is that voters, in some sense, get exactly what they want. As a people we can elect a president that expands Medicaid because we believe that everyone should be able to see a doctor if they are ill, but we can elect a governor that will oppose Medicaid expansion in our state

because we are outraged by excessive government spending. We can elect a president that wants to reduce our foreign involvement and reduce our military expenditures and we can simultaneously elect a Congress that wants to send additional troops abroad and increase the military budget. When the public is at odds with itself, it can elect a government at odds with itself. Our government is divided because we are divided. This is the nature of American democracy.

The book's title was inspired by the Roman god Janus. Janus is not a two headed monster. Janus is a guardian who stands at the gate but who looks both forwards and backwards. He has one head with two faces. His bicephaly isn't two distinct things it is one thing that consists of two opposites. Each face may speak something different but both faces represent the will of the majority. This seems like an apt analogy when describing the role of "the People" in our democratic system.

Methodologically, this book similar to McClosky and Zaller's *The American Ethos*. It presents an argument about the fundamental nature of public opinion by presenting evidence from public opinion polls to support the argument. It is not designed to be a rigorous test of a hypothesis where data is used to accept or reject a null hypothesis within a particular confidence interval. It is more philosophical and attempts to inject theoretical insights from philosophical works into the discipline of public opinion research. These two disparate disciplines converge when they attempt to determine what constitutes the general will. In a democracy, it is this general will that is supposed to govern. But what is the nature of the general will, not just in the abstract, but actually based on the evidence we have at hand?

This work attempts to inject some philosophy into the study of public opinion and to inject some empirical evidence into philosophical controversies. As such it is neither a pure

philosophical work, nor a purely empirical analysis of public opinion. It is one author's attempt to bridge the divide between two very different disciplines. Two arguments are presented. The first is that transconsistency causes Americans to be unhappy with their government. The second is that transconsistency causes backlashes in American electoral politics. Are there other variables that might cause dissatisfaction with government or electoral backlashes? Sure, but the purpose of this work is to present a plausible case for transisconsistency and to allow others to follow up with more rigorous empirical testing. Current methods fall short of being able to measure dialetheial paradoxes in public opinion, but I present some recommendations for survey researchers who would like to tackle the question themselves. Scientific progress occurs in small steps and this book is designed to open the door to alternative explanations for observable phenomena, not definitively answer the question of dialetheial paradoxes in public opinion once and for all.

Chapter 1 defines transconsistency and reviews the public opinion literature on the topic of public competence. Converse argues that large proportions of the American public have what he calls "not-attitudes" because they lack ideological constraint and response stability. I argue these are not "non-attitudes" they are "bi-attitudes." The public may, and often does, want two incompatible goals to be accomplished simultaneously. Achen and Bartels argue that American electoral outcomes are like a coin toss. I argue that Americans prefer both heads *and* tails at the same time, but the forced choice of an election makes them choose between heads *or* tails. Americans are competent enough to know which party won the presidential election. If they flipped a head in one election, they will select a tail in the next because they desperately desire the opposite of what they desired before. If they can't get both at the same time, they will make sure to alternate between the two desired options. This accounts for the persistent losses of the

president's party during mid-term Congressional elections. There is ample evidence to suggest that elected officials do respond to public opinion and they attempt to give the public what they want. Those that ignore public demands suffer losses at the polls. But the public is perpetually dissatisfied because they have contradictory and incompatible goals that can't be obtained at the same time.

Chapter 2 details Graham Priest's theory of dialetheial paradoxes. A dialetheial paradox occurs when a sentence and the contradiction of that sentence are both true. In public opinion, when a majority supports and a majority opposes a policy a dialetheial paradox has occurred. Individuals do not need to be aware of their contradictions for the contradictions to exist. The question wording effect, public ignorance, value pluralism, issue saliency, and framing can all cause dialetheial paradoxes to occur. This means that political opponents on opposite sides of an issue can both claim the mantle of majoritarian legitimacy. When both sides have the majority, both sides try to use the bandwagon effect to increase their majority. The result is closely divided electorate that is prone to backlashes. When one side wins, there is an immediate reversal because a majority also supported the other side but could not accurately express itself with the forced choice of an election.

Chapter 3 begins by describing the two types of pragmatism that exist in the theoretical literature. It is the second more subjectivist type of pragmatism that fosters transconsistency in public opinion. Its founder, William James, believes that reality can be willed into being with mere assertion and that expediency should always override consistency. He supports taking "moral holidays" from professed values and is a true opportunist. His disconnect from objective reality and his total disregard for consistency seems to be prevalent among America's political

actors and among the public itself. The philosophy of William James appears to be at the core of Americans' general will.

Chapter 4 discusses social issues. On issues such as evolution, same sex marriage, racial discrimination, and freedom of speech most Americans are on both sides of the debate. Changing how a question is framed can turn majority support into majority opposition. Making one value more salient than another value can also flip majorities. With a majority on both sides political opponents can both claim the mantle of majoritarian legitimacy.

Chapter 5 discusses health care, welfare, environmental policy, government regulations, the federal budget, and campaign financing. On these domestic policy issues, there are majorities on both sides of the debates. Ideological values seem to conflict with practical concerns. Americans dislike the costs, but like the benefits of many government programs. Because the costs and benefits go together, Americans can like and dislike the same policy.

In Chapter 6 Americans' views on foreign policy are addressed. Americans are both interventionist and isolationist. They prefer whatever is in the American interest, but aren't really sure what that is. They'll support foreign interventions to protect America, but they don't like the high costs of such efforts and oppose foreign intervention. They have values, values that they readily abandon when it is expedient to do so. They are not firm believers in promoting democracy, stopping dictators, or preventing genocide. They take "moral holidays" just as the philosophy of William James promotes. Because large proportions of Americans do not pay attention to international events, they can be persuaded in either direction on many foreign policy issues.

Not every instance of a contradiction in public opinion is a “true contradiction.” In Chapter 7, the issues of amending the Constitution to ban same sex marriage, abortion, gene therapy, off shore oil drilling, and the Iraq War are reviewed. On these issues both supporters and opponents claimed majority support, but at least one side, and sometimes both, make misleading claims. This does not mean that there isn’t an underlying paradox, only that the case isn’t as clear cut as in earlier examples.

Chapter 8 discusses the current state of public opinion research and makes some suggestions for improvement. Forced choice questions force respondents to choose between *A or B*, but many respondents might prefer *A and B* even though *A* and *B* are completely incompatible with each other. If Congressional representatives are pragmatists and voters are pragmatists, then measuring government responsiveness to public opinion by using ideological scorecards would be the wrong approach. We wouldn’t expect pragmatists to be ideologically consistent or ideologically coherent. In addition, using only roll call votes to measure our elected officials’ preferences leaves out the votes that never happen. Partisan leaders might prevent a vote on issues where moderate members of their party might support disfavored legislation or oppose favored legislation. Moderates may never get a chance to register their pragmatic preferences, thus making it appear as though ideological polarization is worse than it actually is. Measurement error is likely a serious problem in ideological scorecards. Using filter questions to remove uninformed respondents isn’t 100% effective at what it is attempting to do, but even if we could isolate the views of only the most informed Americans that small group would not be representative of the general will.

Chapter 9 introduces the most interesting paradox of all. Americans want a government that is responsive to public opinion, but the more democratic the political institution is the more

Americans dislike it. Americans are most unhappy with the institutions that are the most responsive to their wishes. When two policies are incompatible, but the public wants both, there is an incentive for politicians to make unrealistic promises and to peddle in misinformation. Pragmatic politicians will say and do whatever will help them win and this strategy seems to pay off electorally. They know that “agreeable fancy” is more popular than the truth and that they are in a popularity contest. The public becomes disappointed when their fanciful desires aren’t fulfilled. The result is adoption of popular policies that are soon followed by popular backlashes against those same policies. On many issues, the public wants to have it both ways and elites must find a way to satisfy these competing desires. Dialectical paradoxes in public opinion is one possible explanation for the persistence of Congressional losses for the president’s party in mid-term elections. When the public opposes the policies they support, they must take immediate action to stop what they wanted to happen from happening. Federalism allows our government to oppose itself when the partisan composition of the federal and state governments is different. Separation of powers allows the government to oppose itself when the branches of government are controlled by parties that oppose each other. Voters can make this self-opposition occur by ticket splitting. Even when rates of ticket splitting are low, there are still a sufficient number of electoral split decisions to make self-oppositional government routine. In addition, individual politicians often find themselves “flip-flopping” on important political issues. In an attempt to respond to public opinion, these politicians find themselves sacrificing consistency for the sake of popularity. They are Jamesian pragmatists who do and say whatever is expedient. Our political institutions are at odds with each other because Americans are at odds with themselves.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

### *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 an inconsistent person, 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 evidence at hand.

A person is transconsistent when they adopt two incompatible values, beliefs, attitudes, or preferences. Values are the ideals that people hold dear and allows 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 person doesn’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 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 anti-foundational, 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 short sighted about the future. Recent considerations often outweigh previous judgements 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 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, 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 have 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, 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 their elected officials, if they 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 prejudices against immigrants and free trade causes the government to adopt policies that make the whole country worse off (Caplan 2007). In the 1970’s 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 fire fighters 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).

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, antforeign 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, then 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 judgement on some dimension of interest about an object regardless of how many objects are being evaluated, while choice is 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 get 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 transconsistent 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 dialetheical 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 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 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% 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 a voter may support lower taxes and more social services. This voter has what we might call a “bi-attitude.” If this voter had to choose between the two partisan legislators, she has reasons to support or oppose either and neither will provide exactly what she prefers. Beyond that, irrespective of who she votes for, or who wins the election, the voter will have reasons to be dissatisfied with the result. That voter 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 measures that seem necessary to bring it about in practice” (McClosky & Zaller 1984, 83). In the 1940’s 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 & 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% 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. 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 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 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. Dialectical paradoxes exist because on many issues Americans might be 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 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 & Zaller 1984, 36). Whether its 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 vary 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 & 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 does know enough and use them as a guide. By using heuristics, a rule of thumb or short cut, 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. 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).

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% 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% 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 micro-targeting. In today’s information age data about internet searches, television programs watched, purchases made, and demographic variables are readily available to advertisers 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 Ph.D., 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 10 pieces of direct mail, call them 5 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 300 voters. Why put so much effort into such a small mailing? Because those 300 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 500 voters here and 1,000 voters over there, each being micro-targeted, 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)

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 9 issues the voter supports John

Kerry's position and on 1 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 micro-targeting 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 that voter's mind.

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 9 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 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 mid-term 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 mid-term elections. There have been only 3 exceptions in those 76 consecutive mid-term 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% probability of selecting a tail next. Some argue that this is explained by the larger turnout in presidential as opposed to mid-term elections. The larger turnout election brings in more minority voters and gives Democrats an advantage. The smaller turnout election is disproportionately 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 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. 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 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 can't be used to guide policy preferences. 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% of the time and chocolate ice cream 10% 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% 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 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. 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 the public is consistently inconsistent. It would be better to argue 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 the attorneys general of Nebraska and Oklahoma, seeking to block Colorado’s legalization of marijuana possession on the ground that federal law criminalizes possession. These same attorneys general have argued that the Affordable Care Act is unconstitutional because it violates states’ rights” (Posner and Sunstein 2015, 3). Their belief in the principle of states’ rights seems to come and go depending on the issue at hand. Empirical evidence suggests that partisans easily “flip-flop” as a result of motivated reasoning (Posner and Sunstein 2015).

Value pluralism means that respondents might have inconsistent and incompatible values and that these values are selectively held on different issues of concern. Respondents with plural values will lack ideological constraint because the respondent is ideologically inconsistent between answers. The respondent will sometimes accept an ideological justification for a policy and other times reject the same ideological justification for a different policy, or the respondent will use different justifications to accept and reject the same policy.

Most Americans, including a majority of both whites and blacks, believe that merit should determine a person’s place in society. Those that are more meritorious, those that display superior talent or effort, should receive more rewards than those with less merit. However, a majority of both whites and blacks readily abandon merit as a selective mechanism when a race based preference benefits their own group. Most Americans also support the hereditary distribution of wealth in direct contradiction to their distribution by merit value (Longoria 2009). When Americans want two contradictory things we can say they are transconsistent. They do actually want both, even if the two preferences are incompatible.

Specifically, this occurs because different values are applied when the situation or issue is changed. Someone might support racial segregation, not because they are racist, but because it is

a matter of states' rights and states should be allowed to make these decisions for themselves based on what the majority of the residents of that state prefer. If a state were to legalize same-sex marriage, this same person might call for a federal constitutional amendment prohibiting same-sex marriage, not because they are homophobes, but because laws should be uniform across the country and because states should not do as they please just because a local majority supports it. This self-serving rationality may not be surprising but it leads to contradictions at best and hypocrisy at worst.

Whereas others have found that people are inconsistent over time, the argument made here is that people are inconsistent simultaneously – they are transconsistent. Some Americans will support both the liberal position and the conservative position when dealing with a particular issue at one point in time. This occurs because value pluralism allows the same individual to hold contradictory and incompatible values when presented with real world decisions. For example,

Many of the inconsistencies in American racial attitudes point to a deep contradiction between two values that are at the core of the American Creed: individualism and egalitarianism. Americans believe strongly in both. One consequence of this dualism is that political debate often takes the form of one consensual value opposing the other.... The poll data reveal a “positive” pro-civil rights agreement when only egalitarian questions are at stake, but a “negative” anti-civil rights consensus when an issue also infringes on basic notions of individualism. Thus, on the central issues involving racial discrimination and Jim Crow practices, American public opinion is powerfully against discrimination. Expressed attitudes on these issues have been consistently “liberal,” and even the white South has joined the national consensus. The general agreement dissolves, however, when compulsory integration and quotas are involved. Many whites deeply resent such efforts, not because they oppose racial equality, but because they feel these measures violate their individual freedom.

(Lipset 1996, 128)

In this way, majorities can be both for and against the same policy. Unfortunately for Lupia, if our values are plural and contradictory, they can't be used to organize our attitudes and

preferences. Of course, he's aware that "our values need not be consistent with one another" (Lupia 2016, 111). But the implication of this is that our attitudes and preferences will be just as fleeting and contradictory as our values and therefore can't be used to consistently guide government policy. Values can be used to justify government policy (in either direction) and this, in the end, may be the best we could do.

### *Does the Government Respond to Public Opinion?*

The knowledge held by the public and the consistency of public opinion would be irrelevant if government policy didn't respond to public opinion. If elites make the decisions and the elites are both knowledgeable and consistent, then the ignorance and inconsistency of the public doesn't matter in the production of public policy. However, if elites respond to public pressure, then policies would be guided by public opinion, at least indirectly. The evidence suggests that elected officials attempt to conform to the public's demands, even if many in the public can't identify which leader supports which policy. Public opinion has an impact on government policy not because the public can choose the politicians that support their preferred policies, although they usually can, but because politicians gather polling information and conform to majoritarian demands in the hopes of winning the next election. At the state level, states with conservative voters have more conservative policies and states with liberal voters have more liberal policies (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1993). When public opinion changes public officials take notice and government policy changes as a result (Stimson 2015; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; Page and Shapiro 1983).

Somin undermines his own argument when he discusses the political fight over segregation in the 1950's South. He claims more knowledge might be used by an electorate with bad values to harm a minority group.

If the racist majority increases its knowledge of the activities of government officials, it can more effectively identify and punish any who are “slacking off” in their persecution of the despised minority.... In the Jim Crow-era South, for example, political leaders sometimes adopted more discriminatory policies against African Americans than they personally favored in order to satisfy racist public opinion.... Wallace ran his first campaign for governor in 1958 as a relative racial moderate. As a result, he was defeated because of what the voters perceived as his insufficient commitment to white supremacy. A chastened Wallace decided that he would never allow a political opponent to “out-nigger me again” and duly adopted a more segregationist line in future campaigns, which were more successful.

(Somin 2016, 79)

Anecdotes and empirical evidence suggest the same thing. Political leaders adopt views that will help them win elections. As a result there is a link between public opinion and government policy. The People do a reasonably good job getting what they want from government, despite lacking basic information that would seem to be necessary to effectively make correct choices given their own preferences.

More recently, Eric Cantor, the House majority leader, lost to a political novice in a primary election. This occurred despite Cantor’s 50 to 1 fundraising advantage, very high name recognition, and years of successful campaign experience. He lost because his priorities changed over time. His focus as majority leader was party building, strategizing, organizing, and fundraising. He ignored his local constituents who remembered the Cantor of old who would meet with them and prioritize local district concerns over national Republican Party concerns. His constituents were very clearly aware of Cantor’s priorities and they didn’t like it. In his quest to become a national leader Cantor forgot where he came from and his own constituents ousted him as a result. Then, as if to prove his constituents were correct, he left before his term was completed to take a million dollar job offer, leaving his constituents without a representative at all. The public pays attention and they vote accordingly (Bell, Meyer, and Gaddie 2016).

The public is capable of holding elected officials accountable. When politicians don't do what their constituents demand, they lose elections. As a result, our elected leaders, Cantor aside, do everything they can to please their constituents. They promote and attempt to enact policies that the voting public will favor. We have a public that gets what it wants from government, yet they seem to be dissatisfied because "the government doesn't listen to the American people."

[Insert Table 1.1]

It seems that the American public is so ignorant that they don't even realize that the government is doing what the people are demanding. If transconsistency in public opinion is true, then the public doesn't want what the public wants, which is why they're not getting what they wanted.

### *Discontent*

There's two reasons people get angry. The first is when they want something and don't have it. The second source of dissatisfaction occurs when people want two opposite things and can't have both. Think of the human baby, people in their native state before the effects of civilization take hold. They are all impulse and instinct. If you give the baby a lollypop, they will be happy because they have a sweet treat. Take the lollypop away and you get rage, anger, dissatisfaction, wailing sadness, and a deep and profound sense of loss. It's a calamity of horrific proportions to the child who's perceiving in their mind an injustice of epic magnitude. For goodness's sake, give them back the lollypop! What happens when you return the lollypop? The baby flings it at you in a blind rage! That's what you get for taking it away. The baby doesn't even want it anymore. Age moderates our natural impulses, but doesn't eliminate them.

We learn how to restrain our impulses, but they continue to exist and they continue to guide our behavior.

One is reminded of a song written by one of America's greatest music composers and made famous by Marilyn Monroe. Irving Berlin wrote,

Here's what's wrong with you  
After you get what you want you don't want it.  
If I gave you the moon, you'd grow tired of it soon.  
You're like a baby, you want what you want when you want it.  
But after you are presented with what you want, you're discontented.  
You're always wishing and wanting for something  
When you get what you want, you don't want what you get,  
And though I sit upon your knee, you'll grow tired of me,  
'cause after you get what you want,  
You don't want what you wanted at all.

(Kimball and Emmet 2001, 220)

Berlin's songs have become iconic precisely because they speak to fundamental aspects of human nature. People that don't want what they want are destined to be unhappy. This simultaneous wanting and not wanting is called transconsistency and it is embedded in the general will. Give people what they want and they'll be unhappy because it's not what they wanted. Don't give people what they want and they'll be unhappy because they're not getting what they want.

Gurr argues that discontent arises from relative deprivation. Relative deprivation is "the tension that develops from a discrepancy between the 'ought' and the 'is' of collective value satisfaction" (Gurr 1970, 22). In other words, there are things that we want but do not have as a society. There is a perpetual gap between the 'is' and the 'ought' when the 'ought' is unattainable. When the 'ought' is a list of contradictory and incompatible 'oughts' it is not possible to furnish all of them in a sensible way. This leads to frustration that is directed toward



our political system. Our elected officials are caught in a perpetual cycle of attempting to provide the public with what it desires, but because the various desires are incompatible with each other they cycle through success and failure. Success in providing one desire constitutes a failure in providing a contradictory desire. Gurr's relative deprivation is more like perpetual deprivation.

### *Democracy*

There is a story about one of Adlai Stevenson's supporters exclaiming during one of his campaign speeches, "Every thinking man is for you!" To which Stevenson replied, "That's not enough, I need a majority!" There's no documented proof that this ever occurred, but there's no proof that it didn't happen either. Perhaps it's an urban legend told in political circles. Still, its persistence tells us something about how many elites have come to view the public. The public might very well be ill-informed, capricious, ignorant, undemocratic, and dangerous. But we still need them to be part of our political process. If for no other reason, elites need to win elections.

George Gallup and Elmo Roper believed that, "regular public opinion surveys would cure many of the ills of the modern polity by combating the deleterious effect of unresponsive legislatures, political machines, and pressure groups" (Igo 2007, 121). We could finally know what it was that the public believed and what they wanted. Armed with this information reformers could pressure public officials to obey the Will of the People or suffer electoral defeat. Gallup wasn't worried about public competency, "In speech after speech, article after article, Gallup cited his faith in the people to make good decisions" (Igo 2007, 122).

Others disagree. Brennan argues that, "universal suffrage incentivizes most voters to make political decisions in an ignorant and irrational way, and then imposes these ignorant and

irrational decisions on innocent people” (Brennan 2016, 20). Even if people have a right to harm themselves, they don’t have a right to harm others and this is precisely what democracy allows people to do. They can use the authority of the state to harm, “better informed and more rational voters, minority voters, citizens who abstained from voting, future generations, children, immigrants, and foreigners who are unable to vote but still are subject to or harmed by that democracy’s decisions” (Brennan 2016, 22). This makes democracy a poor form of government and Brennan advocates for an “Epistocracy [which] means the rule of the knowledgeable” (Brennan 2016, 27).

Can we trust ordinary citizens to govern? Plato, Aristotle, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Madison, Jefferson, Paine, Burke, Dewey, Lippmann, and many others have tried to answer this question from ancient times to the present. Lupia makes a very important point at it relates to this question, “Competence is defined with respect to a task” (Lupia 2016, 34). We have to ask ourselves competent at what? What are we asking the public to do with regard to political decision making? Selecting policies and selecting leaders to make the policies for us isn’t the same thing.

Achen and Bartels seem to be on the right track when they argue that public choice often appears to be a coin toss. If a respondent prefers heads *and* tails, forcing the respondent to choose doesn’t fully capture the respondent’s preference. But Popkin is also correct with his claim that campaigns matter. The choice between heads and tails isn’t random, it can be influenced and there is a pattern of decision making. If one prefers both heads *and* tails, but selects heads because they had to choose one, then at the next opportunity they’ll select tails in an effort to express their equally strong preference for the opposite choice.

“Millions of people, having moved away from supporting government spending in the late 1970s, were moving back in support in the late 1980s” (Stimson 2015, 30). We know public opinion changes over time and that minority opinion can become the majority opinion. But what accounts for these relatively quick backlashes against seemingly popular proposals? One possibility is that transconsistency causes political backlashes. When people want two opposite things and are given a choice between the two, one of the two will win because a choice was forced. But the reality remains – the public wants both! Having chosen one their top priority is to choose the other at the next available opportunity. The forced choice of elections and the forced choice of many survey questions mask an underlying truth. *In many cases the public wants two incompatible options at the same time.*

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