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978-0-521-56525-7 - Democracy and the Marketplace of Ideas: Communication and Government in Sweden and the United States

Erik Asard and W. Lance Bennett

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How do citizens and leaders in democratic nations communicate about their problems and prospects for the future? What can be learned from other nations about how to communicate in more effective and satisfying ways? These are important questions in an age of instant electronic communication in which the populations of the world's industrial democracies are wired for all manner of input. The irony, or perhaps the result, of communication in this Digital Age is that the quality of political ideas in many nations has deteriorated into simplistic sloganeering and angry rhetoric with little perceptible improvement in the human political condition.

*Democracy and the Marketplace of Ideas* explores the institutional links between society and government that shape political communication. These regulators of national communication include parties and electoral representation systems, interest group processes, campaign finance mechanisms, and the media – factors that are familiar to anyone who follows politics yet that may not be recognized for their combined effects on the quality of political discourse. Erik Åsard and W. Lance Bennett show how these core elements of political systems affect the ways in which people communicate and how effective that communication is at defining public problems and identifying workable solutions.

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Communication and Government in  
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# Preface

How do citizens and leaders in democratic nations communicate about their problems and prospects for the future? What can be learned from other nations about how to communicate in more effective and satisfying ways? These are important questions in an age of instant electronic communication in which the populations of the world's industrial democracies are wired for all manner of input. The irony, or perhaps the result, of communication in this Digital Age is that the quality of political ideas in many nations has deteriorated into simplistic sloganeering and angry rhetoric with little perceptible improvement in the human political condition. This book explores the institutional links between society and government that shape political communication. These regulators of national communication include parties and electoral representation systems, interest group processes, campaign finance mechanisms, and the media – factors that are familiar to anyone who follows politics, yet that may not be recognized for their combined effects on the quality of political discourse. We propose to explore how these core elements of political systems affect the ways in which people communicate and how effective that communication is at defining public problems and identifying workable solutions.

Our main argument is that fundamental changes have occurred in the way that most democratic nations conduct their public discourse – how publics and leaders, in effect, define themselves in the contemporary world. The link between rhetoric and the workings (and breakdowns) of government has never been more apparent. We are witnessing rebellious voters and renegade candidates the world over taking often misguided aim at institutions of power. We take a more systematic look at how institutions forged in earlier eras may limit the terms of national debate. At the same time, it is clear that not all nations face the same institutional limitations, making the study of na-

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tional differences as important as the concern about common trends. The political marketplace in many Western democracies has been transformed from being a forum for heated debate and a comparatively lively exchange of ideas into one dominated by only a few substantive issues and a lot of quite streamlined rhetoric that is more likely to be the product of political marketing research than of inspired leadership. What today's public seems to get, in political systems as diverse as those of the United States and Sweden, are increasingly similar ideas marketed in increasingly similar ways to increasingly smaller audiences. Publics in most of these nations have recognized the marketing and emotionalism of this discourse for what it is: political hype that only accentuates the lack of ideas and the reluctance of parties and leaders to engage in searching national debates. This shrinking range of ideas exchanged among parties, candidates, and publics in the political marketplace is the *leitmotif* of our analysis. This condition results in the spiraling discontent of publics and the fragmentation of traditional forms of governing institutions from disciplined, broad-based parties to stable alliances of interests.

With power fragmented and political language placed increasingly in the service of short-term tactical (opinion and media management) ends, publics come to regard hypocrisy as the political norm. Citizens, too, become corrupted by these experiences and lose the sense that common visions and moral guidance can come from civic life. The rhetoric of candidates and parties alike often encourages people to seek private gain from government rather than common good. The imagined communities that we call societies become pockets of isolated and often suspicious groups easily led by the languages of nationalism, racial animosity, personal economic interest, and suspicion of others. These failures of the political imagination further undermine the possibility for broad visions of society that might promote identification across groups and mobilize support for enduring agendas of political action. Levels of distress caused by these developments are evident in many forms, including the loss of confidence in politicians and governments reported in countless opinion polls, attacks on government itself by candidates and elected leaders, and the accompanying loss of governmental stability. At the personal level, we note chronic increases in drug and alcohol abuse (among other problems) in many nations, along with other lifestyle disruptions caused by rising levels of underemployment in allegedly recovering economies. At such historical moments, it becomes important to investigate the ways different governmental systems respond to the demands for political guidance that loom so large in the minds of their citizens.

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## THE POLITICS OF IDEAS

The solutions for these dilemmas are not so simple as just thinking about society anew – although that is not a bad place to start. Ideas are not free-floating entities: their origins, publicity, popular comprehension, nurturance, and implementation depend on institutional conditions that give political life (or death) to the human imagination. Even the most brilliant or workable ideas can be stifled by the overbearing institutions of government when those same institutions select and promote often absurd or demonstrably failed policies instead. Our primary interest is to understand how governing ideas are produced in different political systems. More important, in light of the trends noted, we are interested in how different systems respond to the decline of ideas and to the growing disjunctures among parties, leaders, publics, political ideas, and the agendas of governments. Our goal is to place this contemporary democratic disarray – along with signs of promising changes – in comparative and historical perspective.

The comparative framework developed in this book – and tempered by the analysis of two very different national cases – is intended to apply to any advanced industrial democracy that has evolved relatively stable arrangements for party government, interest aggregation and expression, political finance, and mass political communication. Differences between nations become, from this perspective, opportunities to compare and learn. In particular, our approach clarifies how key institutional differences between nations affect the production of political ideas and how those ideas are incorporated into the governing process.

Our most sweeping contribution in this book is to point out the inseparability of institutions and ideas. The popular notion of “empty rhetoric” may reflect less the failure of human imagination or the mysterious dearth of inspired leaders than the propensity of particular institutional habits to actively block the consideration of new ideas. Rather than continue deploying these same institutional routines (only to discover that the rhetoric remains empty), it may make more sense to think about institutional reforms as the first step toward opening up the national dialogue to new ideas. This is a lesson that cannot be learned from just one nation alone but requires study of the ways various polities engage with similar problems and issues. Today’s world has provided us with a set of laboratory conditions ripe for exploring different democracies that are going through remarkably similar experiences. In the spirit of breaking down barriers to thinking about how nations can better ad-

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dress their difficulties, we invite the reader to join us on an exploration of political rhetoric and governance in two interesting political systems. For the people of these two systems who may read this book, we encourage the attitude that this is not just a book about ourselves but a book about each other.

### A TALE OF TWO NATIONS

In developing this framework, we have concentrated on two nations in particular, Sweden and the United States. These countries are very different in terms of size, party and election systems, communication institutions, interest processes, and political cultures – particularly in traditional citizen expectations about the nature and responsibilities of government. Like many scholars before us, we were drawn to these contrasts as challenges to the construction of more general and durable frameworks of comparative analysis. In particular, we were drawn to the comparison for several other reasons. First, these two different political systems are suffering some startlingly similar political patterns and problems. Second, the ways in which leaders and voters are trying to sort these problems out reflect some interesting similarities and differences that invite generalizations beyond any that could be supported by a study of either nation alone. Finally, as has been noted, two such different countries present interesting challenges for theory and comparison. If we can say something useful about cases as different as these, then we may have something to say about general problems of democratic institutions and their capacity to help people address and resolve new conditions and problems in society.

The United States and Sweden today find themselves in similar states of democratic disarray. In both countries confidence in governments, leaders, and parties has declined sharply in the post–World War II period. Traditional forms of communication between leaders and citizens have given way to short-term emotional media campaigns aimed at mobilizing public support for policies and votes for candidates. These battles for public opinion have undermined stable political coalitions based on earlier and more enduring governing visions. Publics increasingly view politicians with suspicion, and politicians approach publics warily with an eye to polls and news management. Citizens reinforce this vicious spiral by abandoning party loyalties and adopting centrist and increasingly personalized political outlooks. Parties scramble to stay in power by fitting their ideas to these shifting trends in opinion, trying to capture blocs of opinion and votes for narrow, strategic political ends.

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The paradox is that as mass communication grows more sophisticated, the media are used to transmit ever more personalized political messages to ever more isolated and carefully marketed networks of information consumers. As the electronics frontier expands into the realm of virtual reality, citizen disconnection from social and civic institutions may be replaced by growing participation in imaginary electronic communities. The resulting fragmentation of publics and the targeting of specialized groups with personalized messages suggest the parallel development of a virtual democracy. As political leaders increasingly rely on coterie of pollsters and media consultants to manage their communication with citizens, the hope for spontaneous, two-way exchanges of ideas becomes ever more remote, as does the hope for developing more sustainable, long-term ideas for governing. Hence, the irony is that as communication technologies become more sophisticated and individuals are more easily brought on-line, the hope for greater public autonomy and input becomes more remote.

The problem lies with political communication strategies aimed at shoring up power in institutions that are products of an earlier political era – institutions that are, in the largely prescient view of publics, inhibiting creative solutions for the problems of the present day and age. The core breakdowns in these electronic democracies result from communication techniques that effectively prevent, defuse, or deflect unmanageable citizen input, thereby creating a “democracy without citizens,” in the words of communication scholar Robert Entman. Despite the considerable institutional and cultural differences in our two national cases, we note that the institutional power arrangements from which enduring governing agendas emerge have become fragmented and unstable. An important result of the present institutional disarray, we believe, is the failure of governments and democratic politicians to communicate with the electorate about the causes of current national troubles and to hold forth a guiding vision for a brighter future. At the same time, this failure of ideas further undermines the stability of governments.

## EXTERNAL PROBLEMS, INTERNAL SOLUTIONS

The causes of democracy’s contemporary dilemmas may be external to nations in important respects. The collapse of communism has left an ideological void throughout the Western world, leaving both the left and the right frustrated and disoriented. The restructuring of world economic production

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and money markets, and the resulting dislocations in national economies, have increased citizen demands on government institutions forged by earlier – and very different – political and economic conditions. As governments have let the regulation of multinational corporations slip their grasp, the nation–state has increasingly become hostage to private international business and economic regimes. Pressures to yield national powers to international governing entities have witnessed the United States joining the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and Sweden struggling over the loss of sovereignty implied by membership in the European Union, and both nations supporting the rollback of tariff barriers and labor protections in the latest round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

At the same time, these external forces rocking the contemporary world are surely no greater than the global depression of the 1930s that witnessed dramatic rebirths of the political imagination and the rise of new governing visions within many nations. In that earlier era the diffusion of Keynesianism and often sweeping transformations of national institutions were inspired by changing definitions of government itself. Yet today's debates about similarly momentous changes are conducted as media spectacles, generating little sense of where this world system is going or how to protect the needs of national citizens affected by these changes. One of the issues that we explore at some length is what permitted grand governing visions to sweep into national politics following this earlier period of international transformation, while nations today continue to trade on those spent ideas of *l'ancien régime*.

Equally important to understand about the contemporary rhetoric of many nations, including those of our two cases, is the overwhelming tendency of politicians to win elections and mobilize short-term support through misguided symbolic policy initiatives such as crime crackdowns, moral crusades over abortion and religious freedoms, and restrictions on immigration and immigrants. Such policy concerns may actually divert public attention from more important underlying national issues and undermine the capacity of nations to invent workable social and economic policy agendas based on stable systems of political ideas.

These circumstances underscore the importance of language in politics and the relations between language use and the institutions of power and communication that have evolved in particular political systems. Whether the language of politics is high-minded and effective or base and misguided, it shapes policies and political actions. Following the work of Murray

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Edelman, we are reminded that language is a form of political action that shapes human sensibilities, directs public attention and concern, and ultimately directs the course of national policy. It is conceivable that dysfunctions in national communication about society's problems actually lead to policies that worsen underlying conditions. As conditions worsen and citizen psychology becomes more volatile, the opportunities for reasoned discourse about institutional reforms become more difficult to create through routine political channels such as voting or the exchange of ideas in the daily news.

Even if constructive solutions for pressing problems exist in the writing of theorists or in the experiences of leaders, they may be hard to sell and even harder to implement as a result of various breakdowns in national institutions. Both the rhetoric and the resolve of politicians are undermined and destabilized as parties lose their bases of mass support, as interest groups pull against the grain of common social values, as campaign finance practices permit a powerful few to set the tone of election discourse, and as the electronic media publicize dramatized, short-term visions of society over more thoughtful and educated exchanges between citizens and their governors. In these ways, governing ideas have fallen prey to communication marketplaces that are either poorly regulated or, worse yet, that are regulated by political brokers to maintain aging institutions and power arrangements that are no longer responsive to contemporary national realities.

## THE MARKETPLACE OF IDEAS

This analysis of political language, institutions, and citizen responses in two democracies is based on the idea of a marketplace. In the simplest sense, election campaigns, interest group conflicts, and policy battles involve exchanges of political language for political support. As they become realized in this process, ideas – no matter how uninspired their origins – can alter the shape of policy and the course of government. The rhetoric of such dynamic exchanges can be understood variously as political promises, attacks on opponents, arousal of fears, explanations of programs, exhortations to support parties, and so forth. However, the important point is that these exchanges are shaped by the institutions and power arrangements through which the following are accomplished:

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- Candidates are nominated and financed.
- Parties gain representation and power in government.
- Organized interests are expressed.
- Mass communication media inform publics about candidates, interest group activities, and public policy debates.

This perspective offers a new approach to the often ignored intersection of language, institutions, and mass political communication. We propose to look squarely at the impact of such institutional and power arrangements on the production and public valuation of ideas in policy debates and elections. This focus includes not just social, economic, and political theories but the everyday rhetoric used to sell those theories to the masses. As great ideas become worn down by historical and institutional changes, it may be the everyday rhetoric of politics that carries most of the intellectual load. And this load is supported poorly by forms of political communication that have made the term *empty* almost synonymous with the term *rhetoric* in contemporary politics. Yet the sweep of political history tells us of times within many polities when rhetoric inspired people, forged alliances, explained complex ideas in compelling ways, and brought the creative human potential of politics into the governing process.

Whatever the intellectual status of the rhetoric that links citizens to leaders and leaders to government, it is important to understand the institutional forces and constraints that shape that rhetoric. It is equally important to understand that, whether grandiloquent or superficial, the language of politics is not only the simple invention of candidates and their personal advisors but also the product of the institutions and systemic constraints within which those politicians make their calculations about what to tell the people and how to put it symbolically.

## OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Part I provides a broad overview of democracy, communication, and the marketplace of ideas. Chapter 1 explores in more detail the problems of democracy mentioned in the foregoing section, providing an overview of the ways in which institutions and power arrangements affect political communication in contemporary democracies. In Chapter 2, we identify the mechanisms of the idea market that define the rhetorical capacities of nations: party and

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election systems, interest group processes, campaign finance practices, and mass media organizations.

Part II traces the rise and fall of the last great governing ideas to dominate the politics of our two nations: the New Deal in the United States (Chapter 3) and the remarkably parallel idea of the *folkhem* that introduced the vision of government as the “people’s home” in Sweden (Chapter 4). These grand ideas have had an impact on elections, public policy, and the accompanying rhetoric in both countries for much of this century, serving in such capacities as (1) a focus for political mobilization and opposition in society, (2) intellectual guidance for policy processes, (3) easy-to-grasp public explanations for the actual policy results, and (4) rhetorical targets for opponents.

The institutional differences in our two cases illustrate the different capacities of our two nations to respond creatively to policy and leadership challenges, as explored in the case studies of policy processes and elections in Part III. Chapter 5 analyzes the interplay of institutions and ideas in the policy process involving tax reforms in the United States (1986) and Sweden (1990). Although both cases display remarkably similar political origins, the inability of the decision makers in the U.S. system to control either direct interest group pressure or the impact of campaign finance on party discipline ultimately admitted a high volume of noise into the communication process and undermined the coherence of the tax policy itself. Candidate-party rhetoric in recent national elections in both countries is analyzed in Chapter 6, where the key question is: How do leaders and parties adjust their political messages to new political circumstances such as the declining loyalty of voters and the abandonment of traditional party positions on issues?

Part IV contains the concluding discussion in Chapter 7, which reviews the comparisons introduced in the book, beginning with the rise and fall of dominant governing ideas and proceeding to how the decline of those ideas has created problems in contemporary public policy making and the electoral configuration of government itself. This summary draws out the similarities and differences in the idea markets of the two nations, emphasizing the dilemmas encountered in mobilizing stable public support in systems driven increasingly by short-term emotional rhetoric. A more detailed overview is found at the end of Chapter 1.

In general, we note how the market mechanisms identified in both nations (election and party systems, interest arrangements, political financing, and the mass media) have grown unwieldy, and often work against each other in

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ways that inhibit the revitalization of governing ideas. However, differences in these institutional arrangements in each nation also matter in important respects for the production of policies and the rhetoric that links them to citizens. The comparative complexity of American institutions and the decentralized relations among them make it difficult for leaders to lead, parties to govern, and citizens to maintain loyalty to broad governing agendas. In a sense, the more centralized and interconnected Swedish institutions may make it easier to govern even when the rhetorics that connect publics to policies are in disarray. The Swedish experience suggests that new ideas are relatively easier to introduce into the political forum. Moreover, even when those ideas are eventually rejected as models for national renewal (as has been the case with various “new idea” parties and coalitions entering Parliament and government in recent years), the activities of government are less likely to be destabilized in the process. Understanding the effects of these different institutional and power arrangements enables us to conclude by identifying possible reforms that might create more responsive governments and more public consensus about national problems and priorities. The book closes with a look at what we have learned that can be applied to the political discontents of democracies in the contemporary world.

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