

## I

## Democratic Accountability and the “Rational” Citizen

Democracy is the theory that the common people know what they want, and deserve to get it good and hard.

– Henry Louis Mencken (1916, 19)

For all of its praise as an ideal form of government, democracy provokes a lot of scorn in practice. In its pure and ideal form, democracy is premised on a simple idea: the people govern themselves. Enshrined in this idea is the principle that socially binding decisions should reflect the will of the people. In the United States and most other advanced industrial societies, rule by the people is a widely accepted, uncontroversial political creed. It is an idea so fundamental and self-evident that democracy, at least in the abstract is as much a virtue as kindness or patience. Like so many other things, however, what seems great in the abstract is usually less so in practice. As Henry Louis Mencken’s wry opening quote illustrates, despite democracy’s broad appeal, there is a great deal of pessimism surrounding the notion that people are actually capable of self-government.

Much of this pessimism derives from the translation of democratic ideals into real-world institutions. In its ideal form, democracy achieves rule by the people quite simply by giving all the adult citizens in a society the right to vote directly on matters of public policy. Seen as unwieldy if not impossible to re-create in large-scale societies, the democratic governments that took shape in the nineteenth century relied on republican institutions in which a smaller group of individuals chosen through election would make decisions on behalf of the people. Republican institutions generate democratic outcomes insofar as elected

policy makers make decisions that faithfully represent the wishes of the constituents who elected them. Benjamin Franklin (2003/1787, 398) offered a succinct explanation of the people's role in an electoral democracy during the convention that drafted the US Constitution and created the first modern electoral democracy. He said, "In free governments, the rulers are the servants and the people their superiors and sovereigns."<sup>1</sup> Restated in academic parlance, Franklin's view of electoral democracy designates the people as the "principals" and their elected representatives as their "agents." The principal-agent arrangement is a common element of industrialized societies where people must rely on others to accomplish their tasks. Any time we take our clothes to the dry cleaner or our car to the mechanic, we enter into a principal-agent arrangement. All works out well if the agent independently shares the principal's goals, because the agent wants to do what the principal wants done. However, this is not always the case. For instance, when we take our clothes to the dry cleaner and our car to the mechanic, our goal is to get our clothes clean and our car fixed. Yet the dry cleaner and the mechanic want our money, not necessarily for our clothes to be clean and our car repaired. So, we have to find a way to make dry cleaners and mechanics accountable for the services they provide such that they are rewarded for rendering good service and punished for rendering poor service. Therein lies the so-called *principal-agent problem*.

In the context of electoral democracy, the principal-agent problem involves the concern that elected representatives may not be faithful to the will of the people, that they may shirk their responsibilities by pursuing policies and programs that are contrary to public opinion. Given the skills needed to campaign and appeal to a broad group of people, elections generally ensure that representatives are going to have greater social prestige and privilege than the average citizen (Manin, 1997). Consequently, one cannot simply assume that the preferences of elected representatives will match the preferences of the larger electorate. This simple fact means that republican institutions reflect democratic principles insofar as citizens hold elected representatives accountable for their decisions. Short of resorting to tar and feathers, elections offer the only reliable mechanism for ordinary citizens to hold elected officials accountable for their actions. From the principle-agent perspective, people exercise *democratic accountability* when they use elections as a way to put in place representatives who follow the will of the people and remove those who do not.

The principal-agent framework was born in economics at a time when economists widely assumed that people arrive at decisions through dispassionate and calculated reasoning. In a word, people are “rational.” Consequently, this idealized model of democratic accountability also assumes that citizens behave rationally. What constitutes “behaving rationally” varies from scholar to scholar, but at a minimum the principal-agent model of democratic accountability presumes that citizens behave in accordance with three principles. First, citizens form policy preferences that are internally consistent and connected to an ideological worldview. Second, citizens base their evaluations of elected representatives on the policy decisions that they make as well as how those policies perform. Third, citizens vote for office holders who make policy decisions that are consistent with citizens’ preferences (Lenz, 2012) and generate positive outcomes (Ferejohn, 1986; Key, 1966), and they vote against those who do not.

For better or worse, students of democratic politics have settled on the principal-agent framework as a normative benchmark by which to judge the health of democratic accountability, and by extension the degree to which representative political institutions reflect the will of the people. It is the gap between this idealized model of democratic citizenship and the behavior of actual citizens that gives rise to much of the current-day consternation over democracy in practice. At the risk of oversimplification, and no doubt at the cost of minimizing nuance, we categorize the various takes on the functioning of democratic accountability in the United States into two loose camps: the optimists and the pessimists. The debate exposes the fault line between scholars who approach the study of politics from the vantage point of economic theories and those who do so from the perspective of psychological theories. Those who take an economic approach are more sympathetic to the assumption that people behave in fundamentally rational ways (Chong, 2013), while those who take a psychological approach point to substantial empirical evidence that people’s reasoning is clouded and distorted by all sorts of biases and constraints (e.g., Kahneman, 2011) that make it difficult (if not impossible) for many individuals to arrive at their political preferences and make political decisions through dispassionate and calculated reasoning (e.g., Lodge and Taber, 2013).

Because political parties organize electoral politics and fundamentally structure the choices that citizens make, they lie at the center of this debate. Pessimistic accounts of democratic accountability identify

citizens' emotional attachments to political parties as an especially problematic source of bias that fuels *motivated reasoning*, while optimistic accounts paint party attachments as a useful guide or *heuristic*. From the optimistic perspective, people choose to affiliate with the political party that most closely represents their policy preferences, which helps them make political decisions more efficiently. Rather than spending time and energy developing an encyclopedic knowledge of public policy, people can look to the policy positions taken by partisan elites and adopt the ones that their party takes (Lupia, 1994). At the same time, people continue to evaluate how well their party's policies achieve their preferences and interests, and they are willing to switch party allegiances if their party lets them down (Fiorina, 1981). From the pessimistic perspective, party attachments – whether they are initially rooted in policy preferences or not – become a social identity that causes people to root for their party like they would for a sports team. As a result, partisan attachments motivate people to maintain a positive view of their party at the expense of ensuring that their party advocates political policies that are aligned with their interests. If the pessimists are right, elected representatives can count on constituents who share their party affiliation to support them irrespective of whether they choose policies that are consistent with their constituents' underlying preferences and interests (Cohen, 2003), undermining the central tenets of democratic accountability.

Ultimately, this dispute is about whether the act of thinking helps people make good political decisions. The classical economic models that underlie many optimistic accounts presume that people think the way computers process information – according to dispassionate optimization algorithms. In contrast, the psychological models of motivated reasoning that populate most pessimistic accounts equate thinking with a form of mental gymnastics that helps people rationalize the things they want to believe. In this book we take a different approach to thinking about thinking. We draw on insights from the behavioral revolution in the decision sciences, which fuses economic and psychological traditions, to start with a more accurate view of how the human mind works and, in the end, provides a new perspective on rationality. Human decision making does not begin and end with thinking, which is a conscious act. It begins with the unconscious mind pointing the way by quickly and effortlessly formulating an emotionally charged gut reaction or *intuition*. Sometimes our intuitions point us in the right direction, and sometimes they do not. When they do, we do not need to rely much on thinking to make a decision. Yet when our intuitions point in the wrong direction,

thinking can help. It is not guaranteed to help, however – after all, if we are strongly motivated to do what our intuitions suggest, we can simply rationalize those intuitions rather than reflect on the best course of action.

This book is about the role that *reflection* plays in political decision making. In the pages that follow, we adopt a very specific definition for the word reflection. It occurs when people use thought to critically evaluate their intuitions and override their intuitions when they point in the wrong direction. As the title of our book indicates, we think that reflection tames people's intuitions. Human intuition is an incredibly powerful resource that helps us make many complex decisions quickly and efficiently. Nonetheless, our intuitions are not perfect, and, left unchecked, they can sometimes lead us astray. Reflection is that check. In democratic politics, our intuition is to side with the political party we like the best. When elected officials affiliated with our party take actions that are consistent with our ideological preferences, our intuition points us in the right direction. When they do not – when they choose policies that fail, when they take positions that are inconsistent with our values, or worse, when they are corrupt – our intuition leads us astray. It is in these instances that our intuition encourages us to behave like motivated reasoners who continue to support candidates and elected officials despite the evidence indicating that we should not. It is in these instances when a heavy dose of reflection is needed to counter our worst instincts and help us behave rationally.

We offer an updated model of political reasoning that formalizes the interplay between intuition and thought. In doing so, we improve on extant models of political decision making in several ways. We provide an explanation for where people's partisan motivations come from as well as why people vary in the degree to which they behave like motivated reasoners. Extant models of motivated reasoning surmise that people's motivations vary (cf. Kunda, 1990) but do not explain why. In addition, our model elaborates how people differ with respect to the way in which they process political information, rather than assuming that people evaluate information in a uniform way. Consequently, it offers insight into why people, when confronted with the same facts, put more weight on some facts than on others as well as why people who are highly attentive to and knowledgeable about politics do not consistently behave in ways that most of us would consider rational or reasonable. Finally, our model provides a positive role for thinking. Without a doubt, many voters use thought – to the extent that they think at all – to rationalize their decisions

(Lodge and Taber, 2013), but some do not, and we can predict the type of voter who tends to be more reflective and, as a result, more rational.

Our model demonstrates that neither the optimists nor the pessimists are entirely correct. We find that reflection minimizes partisan reasoning and promotes democratic accountability. Because the propensity to be reflective varies across individuals and contexts, partisan identities can indeed cloud people's judgments and undermine democratic accountability in the process, but they do not do so in every context or for every person. These findings put us in neither the optimists' nor the pessimists' camp. Rather, we consider ourselves to be realists who see conditional applicability of *both* of these competing schools of thought. Whether people can live up to the standard set by the textbook model of democratic accountability depends on who they are and the circumstances they confront. We find ourselves in agreement with Hobbes – the stuffed tiger in the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* penned by Bill Watterson, not the seventeenth-century political philosopher – who said, “The problem with people is that they're only human.”<sup>2</sup> The function of democracy depends on humans, and while it is true that humans are inherently fallible, it is false to presume that citizens are equally incapable of navigating the demands placed on them within a democracy. Our contribution is to offer an explanation for why some people are better at doing that than others.

#### I.1 DO PARTISAN ATTACHMENTS UNDERMINE DEMOCRATIC ACCOUNTABILITY?

Before we say more about our take, we believe that it is important to elaborate what all the fuss is about. Much ink has been spilled over whether political parties undermine citizen rationality and democratic accountability because they occupy the organizational core of electoral democracy. As E. E. Schattschneider (1942, 1) put it, “The political parties created democracy and modern democracy is unthinkable save in terms of the parties.” This assertion is certainly the case in the United States, which led the movement toward electoral democracy in the modern era and serves as the empirical testing ground for our theoretical model. Although the framers of the US Constitution did not envision the rise of political parties and, in fact, thought that republican institutions would guard against groups based on particular interests, or “factions” (e.g., bankers, farmers, etc.), dominating political decisions (Madison, 2003/1787), it did not take long for various factions to forge stable alliances in the first US Congress and to congeal into political parties that organized legislative

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action (Hoadley, 1986) and ultimately electoral politics (Aldrich, 1995). The two major political parties in the United States organize and reduce the choices before voters (as do parties in other countries). Citizens do not merely choose among candidates in an election; they choose among candidates affiliated with the Democratic and Republican parties. As a result, many people develop attachments to the political parties, as they reliably support one party over another from election to election, and come to see themselves as democrats and republicans.<sup>3</sup> Pessimism greeted the emergence of political parties from the start. In his farewell address, President George Washington considered what he called “the spirit of party” to be “the worst enemy” of electoral democracy in large part because he believed that “[t]his spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its roots in the strongest passions of the human mind” (Washington, 1796).

In contrast, optimists do not see partisan affiliations as inherently problematic. Many optimistic accounts begin with the assumption that citizens possess rationally formed preferences about political issues. Drawing on Anthony Downs’s (1957) highly influential formalized account of the textbook model of democracy, preferences are typically defined as a rank ordering of likes and dislikes, which are “... stable, consistent, informed, and connected to abstract principles and values” (Chong and Druckman, 2007, 103). In the domain of politics, “abstract principles and values” can be thought of as a political ideology that is summarized along a single dimension where those who fall toward the left end prefer government regulation of the economy and those who fall toward the right end prefer less government regulation. Armed with rationally formed preferences, citizens choose the candidate who takes policy positions closest to their preferred ideological position and demonstrates a record (when in office) of generating policy outcomes that fall closest to their preferred outcomes. Because candidates affiliate with political parties, it is only natural for citizens to develop preferences about which political party to support. Yet, like policy preferences, people connect their party preferences to their ideological worldview and update their evaluation of the political parties in light of the outcomes that their policies produce when they control the government (e.g., Fiorina, 1981; Franklin and Jackson, 1983; Weinschenk, 2010). The extent to which people continue to support the same party from election to election is simply an artifact of stability in the political parties’ relative positions and performance (Key, 1966; Fiorina, 1981). Consequently, party attachments do not undermine democratic accountability, because a reversal in fortunes or marked shift in issue

positions would bring about swift changes in party attachments or, at the very least, how people vote.

Many pessimists take issue with the assumption that citizens possess meaningful preferences on the vast majority of political issues. This line of inquiry was set in motion by a quartet of researchers at the University of Michigan who provided a social psychological account of voting behavior in their tome, *The American Voter* (Campbell et al., 1960). Their portrait of the electorate found that most citizens simply have a diffuse sense of what they like and dislike when it comes to matters of politics instead of possessing a stable, consistent, and informed rank order of policy alternatives. That is, people have *attitudes* about politics, which are summaries of likes and dislikes, rather than preferences that impose order on likes and dislikes (Bartels, 2003). Outside a few issues that are of personal relevance, most people have a rather shallow understanding of the issues that lie at the center of political debates among elites (Bishop, 2004; Converse, 1964). Consequently, it is possible to sway many people's opinions with arbitrary shifts in language and clever, but misleading, rhetorical devices (e.g., Bartels, 2003; Jacobs and Shapiro, 2000; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley, 1997), or shifts in media coverage that bring one set of considerations, say terrorism and crime, to the fore over others (McCombs and Shaw, 1972; Zaller, 1992).

In response to the criticism that most ordinary Americans lack coherently organized political preferences, one strand of research within the optimist camp contends that people can use contextual cues, such as the source of a political message, to form political attitudes that are consistent with their values and behave as if they held meaningful preferences (Lupia, 1994; Lupia and McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1994). These contextual cues act as helpful heuristics that constitute a rational strategy to reduce one's effort to remain informed about politics while arriving at the same decisions that one would if one were fully informed. From this perspective, party affiliation serves as a useful heuristic, since it gives people a simple decision rule. People, according to this account, can adopt the policy positions taken by prominent members of their party and reject those taken by members of the opposing party, and in doing so, they can develop a preference ordering without the fuss of thinking too much about it (Druckman, 2001; Levendusky, 2010; Zaller, 1992).

Pessimists share George Washington's view that party attachments are grounded in an atavistic "spirit," leading them to take a less sanguine view of heuristics. Pointing to an influential strand of research in psychology on decision making, they note that heuristics do not always serve as

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effective shortcuts and can often lead people to make mistakes (for an accessible summary of this literature, see Kahneman, 2011). In the domain of politics, pessimists see the political party as an unreliable heuristic. The problem begins with the reality that many people gravitate to a political party early in life and come to see their attachment to their party as an element of their personal identity (Campbell et al., 1960). Some people are democrats or republicans in the same way that they are Catholics, Californians, or Cubs fans. They are members of a group, and their identity with that group takes on a life of its own. To the extent that partisans bring their political attitudes in line with the positions taken by their party as an expression of group solidarity, they cede considerable decision-making power to political leaders (Dickson and Scheve, 2006; Lenz, 2012). It puts the party in the catbird seat when it comes to picking and choosing what issue positions partisans should adopt. As a result, parties act as an effective heuristic insofar as party leaders take positions that are consistent with their followers' values. If they do not, people's partisan identities will lead them astray (Cohen, 2003).

A parallel strand of research undertaken by optimists dismisses concerns about the consistency of citizens' issue preferences by focusing on how people respond to evidence of policy performance. They point to considerable evidence that shifts in aggregate public opinion, including party attachments, reflect actual events, such as international conflicts and economic outcomes (e.g., Brace and Hinckley, 1991; Conover, Feldman, and Knight, 1986; Durr, 1993; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson, 1989; Page and Shapiro, 1992). Electoral outcomes also reflect economic performance, with incumbents enjoying reelection in good times and being kicked to the curb in bad times (see Fair, 2009). Shifts in public opinion, in turn, correlate with policy making (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson, 1995), and public opinion responds to shifts in policy (Wlezien, 1995). The relationship between the public and their elected officials is akin to the relationship between a thermostat and a furnace. When the public wants more liberal policies, it gets them and then responds by reducing its demands for liberal policies. As a result, even if people fail to hold coherent preferences connected to their values, they seem capable of holding elected officials accountable for the outcomes that their policies produce.

As should be familiar by now in this scholarly tennis match, pessimists are not convinced. The influence of partisan identities extends beyond political attitudes, they contend. Partisan attachments cause people to adopt a distorted party-affirming view of reality. After all, people are

quite capable of rationalizing away inconvenient facts in the realm of politics (cf. Lodge and Taber, 2013). Partisans do not always follow the trail of the cold, hard facts. They judge the economy as doing better when their party is in power than they do when the other party is at the wheel (Bartels, 2002). Even when events – such as times of war and calamity – constrain people’s ability to believe whatever they wish about reality, their partisan identities still cause them to accept the obvious but interpret facts in ways that are favorable to their party (Bisgaard, 2015; Gaines et al., 2007). These biases do not go away by aggregating people’s opinions or voting decisions (Althaus, 2003; Bartels, 1996; Duch, Palmer, and Anderson, 2000; Nir, 2011). These findings, viewed in a pessimistic light, call into question whether we can accurately interpret the correlation between aggregate opinion and political outcomes as evidence of democratic accountability at work in the American system. After all, if the signal is biased, so too is the output. As a result, shifts in party control of government may have less to do with voters acting like a “rational god of vengeance and reward” (Key, 1964, 567) than with a perverse expression of random shocks and irrelevant events (Achen and Bartels, 2016; Healy, Malhotra, and Mo, 2010).

## 1.2 OUR TAKE: PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT

As we have already said, we count ourselves as realists. To loosely paraphrase former US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, a democratic system operates with the people as they exist, not as we might want or wish they did.<sup>4</sup> As realists, we believe that in order to understand the relationship between partisanship and democratic accountability, we should begin with a more descriptively accurate theory of how people reason about politics. Our attempt to construct such a theory begins with a simple premise: people process information in fundamentally different ways, and these differences shape whether people behave as motivated partisan reasoners or as reasonable and objective citizens.

We recognize that we are not the first to note that people are different. After all, democracy is premised on the notion that people can resolve their political differences peacefully through democratic institutions. Our point is that people’s differences are not simply about having different views on how the world should work. People do not just want different things; they also go about making up their minds about what they want in different ways. The foundational models that kindled the optimists-pessimists divide presume that people arrive at decisions in the