1 | *Introduction*

Shouts, shoes, and insults

Chances are popular perceptions of political disagreement are shaped by a few widely reported incidents that, while minor in the larger scheme of things, are spectacular enough to capture public imagination and stamp powerful images in the minds of media consumers. While the words and gestures featured in the media coverage may be short and simple, they depict these divides as deep and irreconcilable. "You lie!" shouted at President Obama during his 2009 State of the Union address by disagreeing congressman Joe Wilson became one such image.[1] Similarly, the video of a journalist throwing a shoe at President Bush during a press conference in Iraq, one of the most popular videos on the Internet in 2008,[2] can be taken as an illustration of how individuals behave when they disagree on political matters. Such incidents are not unique to the United States, and presidents are not always the victims in the exchanges. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, for example, was seen in news outlets around the world insulting an opponent at an agricultural fair in Paris, telling him to get lost and calling him "bloody idiot."[3] Thanks to the images created by these widely reported incidents, many people associate political disagreement with lying and other inappropriate behavior. These images – the shout, the shoe, the insult – and other similarly dramatic political incidents likely come to mind when people think about political disagreement.

A large share of the public thus views political disagreement as nothing more than lies and insults (and occasionally shoes) that political actors throw at each other. To be fair, however, incidents involving presidents, though widely diffused by the media, are not the

---

[1] The episode was listed as one of the top ten State of the Union moments by *Politico*. Mackenzie Weinger, "POLITICO'S Top 10 State of the Union Moments," *Politico*, January 2012.

[2] news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/7782422.stm.

[3] The exact phrase he used was "Casse-toi, pauv' con!".

1

only visible manifestations of political disagreement. Citizens who have an interest in politics can easily follow debates of opposing candidates during elections or of lawmakers between elections. Accessing these debates is easy, not even requiring the information to transit through journalists. Legislatures and parliaments are open to the public, and debates occurring in these arenas are widely diffused live on television and online. Then again, there may be little in these debates to change people's perception of political disagreement as pointless and even harmful in terms of societal well-being. After a careful analysis of congressional debates, political scientists Gary Mucciaroni and Paul Quirk conclude, "Anyone listening to debate in Congress will be treated to a stream of half-truths, exaggeration, selective use of facts, and, in a few instances, outright falsehoods."[4] Political disagreement always comes with a dose of cheating, dishonesty, and bad conduct – or so it seems. Even citizens who follow political debates closely, who look beyond presidents and prime ministers to get a broader view of legislative debates, are likely to form a negative perception of political disagreement.

As a consequence, few individuals are likely to view political disagreement as it should be viewed in pluralist societies. That is, negative perceptions are likely to prevail over the understanding of disagreement as a manifestation of the fundamental right to hold beliefs that differ from those that inform policy, or as a process through which opposing arguments encourage policy-makers to think hard about their decisions. The relative absence of a sense of normalcy in relation to political disagreement is somewhat bizarre. In true pluralist societies, anyone who complains about debates between citizens who hold conflicting yet legitimate perspectives on the common good would seem out of sync. In these pluralist societies, no one would dare to publicly blame a citizen with left-of-center preferences for believing that some individual freedoms should be limited in the name of some social goals. It would be equally unthinkable to blame someone on the right of the political spectrum for believing that individual freedoms generally deserve to be promoted rather than limited. To be sure, people may

---

[4] Gary Mucciaroni and Paul J. Quirk, *Deliberative Choices: Debating Public Policy in Congress* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 200–1.

disagree with either of the above stated beliefs, but no one can be denied the right to hold them in true pluralist societies.

Individuals who value pluralism could even be persuaded of the benefit of debates between individuals holding such different beliefs, if only they could dismiss the negative images that tarnish their perception of political disagreement. Indeed, research has shown that debates generally enable positive evolution in political ideas and attitudes.[5] In short, individuals in pluralist societies should have a certain appreciation for political disagreement.[6] Yet, for reasons noted above, any mention of political disagreement spontaneously brings negative images to mind and, as a consequence, a large number of citizens in these societies have become intolerant of political disagreement. In this way, citizens perhaps unconsciously endanger political pluralism.

This apparent paradox may have something to do with the fact that when people are compelled to think about political disagreement, the disagreements that immediately come to mind are those involving the political elite – presidents, prime ministers, and legislators – over which hang suspicions of dishonesty. Few people realize that much, if not most, political activity occurs in the shadow of headline-worthy debates involving celebrity politicians or other highly visible individuals taking unexpected positions – sometimes extreme ones – in disagreements. A limited capacity to pay attention to all issues that deserve attention blinds politicians, placing entire policy areas off the radar for long periods of time.[7] Therefore, a large number of nonelected and less visible actors – including civil servants, interest group representatives, and experts – play significant policy-making roles for long periods in these domains to which politicians pay less attention. Without politicians involved, policy change in these domains is also less visible, occurring quietly as a function

---

[5] Diana C. Mutz, *Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative Versus Participatory Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Gerry Stoker, *Why Politics Matters: Making Democracy Work* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

[6] Robert Huckfeldt, Ken'ichi Ikeda, and Franz Urban Pappi, "Patterns of Disagreement in Democratic Politics: Comparing Germany, Japan, and the United States," *American Journal of Political Science* 49 (2005): 497–514; Robert Huckfeldt, Paul E. Johnson, and John Sprague, *Political Disagreement: The Survival of Diverse Opinions within Communication Networks* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

[7] Bryan D. Jones and Frank R. Baumgartner, *The Politics of Attention: How Government Prioritizes Problems* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

of changing circumstances and of the interplay of beliefs held by low-key civil servants, interest groups, and various other experts. The political disagreements that arise among these actors rarely become highly visible, and are only thrust into the spotlight when one or more actors do something unusual, like staging a spectacle of some sort to attract attention to a political position – and this political position often gets exaggerated in the process.

This book shows that the political disagreements among actors who work in the shadow are, most of the time, of the sort to be expected in pluralist societies. They are nothing to fuss about. They are certainly undeserving of widespread negative perceptions. But most citizens are not aware of this, due to the media's failure to produce a sense of normalcy when it comes to reporting on disagreements. The spotlight is on the shouts, shoes, insults, and other similarly spectacular incidents. Unfortunately, the spotlight rarely shines where most of policy-making occurs.

Taken at face value, debates among nonelected experts and interest groups to inform policy might provide little reassurance. In a democracy, citizens expect policy to be made by officials who are accountable to an electorate. Unlike elected officials, civil servants, interest groups, and independent experts are not obliged to take the views of the public into account when making decisions.[8] This assumed absence of responsiveness is particularly troubling if one accepts as true the bad press received by interest groups and civil servants who are portrayed as self-serving, and sometimes described as radically opposed to policy that best serves the common good. The media and the public appear to trust only independent experts to contribute to policy-making.[9] Interest groups and civil servants rarely get media attention for their policy-making roles; they more often receive media coverage when involved in corruption scandals or other reprehensible activities. This kind of bad press is troubling because, as this book will show, civil servants, interest group representatives, and independent experts engage in precisely the type of political disagreement that is deemed normal, even desirable, in pluralist

[8] E. Scott Adler and John D. Wilkerson, *Congress and the Politics of Problem Solving* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[9] John R. Hibbing and Elizabeth Theiss-Morse, *Stealth Democracy: Americans' Beliefs about How Government Should Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002). The public often views independent experts as trustworthy intellectuals. See Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*.

democratic societies. Policy-making is, in practice, far from the intractable polarization of self-interested actors that is ingrained in the minds of many citizens.

Citizens who follow politics generally rely greatly on the media, which highlight the most extreme manifestations of political disagreement, magnifying them to appear much larger than they really are. In fact, the disagreements covered by the media are so out of proportion that they can only inspire a strong sense of disapproval among citizens, as well as a sense of fear when the coverage includes policy actors who do not hesitate to speak of the catastrophes that could result from the implementation of their adversaries' policy ideas.

By comparing press coverage of disagreements over biotechnology policy and the behavior of the actors involved in this domain, this book argues that the media magnifies political disagreement. The chasm separating the media's portrayal of policy-making and its actual practice is vast. The disagreements reported in the press misrepresent the distance that separates policy actors, including interest groups, experts, and civil servants. Media depictions of policy debates are caricatures that bear much resemblance with the one reproduced on the cover of this book. The media thus unfairly tarnishes the perception of political disagreement, portraying it as a stalemate that is harmful to the pursuit of the common good. Anyone looking at politics through the magnifying glass of the media is thus likely to develop a negative perception of political disagreement – one that is unwarranted in pluralist democratic societies.

In defense of politics

Politics is inseparable from disagreement; in fact, political disagreement is politics. Not all disagreements are political of course, but politics always involves disagreement.[10] Politics is simply a particular form of disagreement. Following Aristotle's suggestion that politics begins with humans' power of speech about the harmful and the unjust, Rancière adds that politics occurs after "the introduction of the incommensurable at the heart of the distribution of speaking bodies."[11] In any human society, members unavoidably come with

[10] Stoker, *Why Politics Matters*.
[11] Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 19.

different, even opposing, beliefs about their common future. Human societies are thus pluralist. Politics begins with the expression of visions of the future that in a pluralist context will produce disagreement. It begins with actors holding different beliefs about the common good, their common future, and who view it as worthwhile to invest a minimum of time and energy in policy-making processes to promote their own vision.

Politics cannot be suppressed, whichever policy process is employed and however sensitive and respectful of differences it might be. In other words, there is no end to politics. It is an illusion to think that proper institutions, knowledge, methods of consultation, or participatory mechanisms can make disagreement go away. Theories of all sorts promote the view that there are ways whereby disagreement can be processed or managed so as to make it disappear. The assumption behind those theories is that disagreement is wrong and consensus is the desirable state of things.[12] In fact, consensus rarely comes without some forms of subtle coercion and the absence of fear in expressing a disagreement is a source of genuine freedom. Debates cause disagreements to evolve, often for the better, but a positively evolving debate does not have to equal a reduction in disagreement. The suppression of disagreement should never be made into a goal in political deliberation. A defense is required against any suggestion that political disagreement is not the normal state of things. Politics requires a defense against theories proposing to clear policy-making of disagreement.[13]

Bernard Crick published the first edition of his defense of politics in 1962.[14] One would think that in 1962 defending politics would have been unnecessary in the Western World. After all, 1962 was shortly after the end of World War II and the fall of authoritarian regimes that oppressed and eliminated people who engaged in political debate. In 1962, communism was on the rise, fiercely combated by the capitalist regimes of the West, whose leaders denounced the persecution of the

---

[12] Several of these theories are popular and casually formulated, notably in the press. Others are well-thought-out academic theories. Theories that value consensus over disagreement include some brands of managerial and deliberative theories. For example: Donald A. Schön and Martin Rein, *Frame Reflection: Toward the Resolution of Intractable Policy Controversies* (New York: Basic Books, 1994).

[13] Matthew V. Flinders, *Defending Politics: Why Democracy Matters in the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[14] Bernard Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 5th ed. (London: Continuum, 2005).

citizens of those countries who disagreed with state policy.[15] Yet, even in the West, Crick saw a need to defend politics.

Although he was writing from a different perspective from Rancière, Crick similarly places disagreement at the heart of politics. Politics, he writes, "arises from accepting the fact of the simultaneous existence of different groups, hence different interests and different traditions, within a territorial unit under a common rule." He further adds that politics "represents some tolerance of differing truths, some recognition that government is possible, indeed best conducted, amid the open canvassing of rival interests."[16] Crick explains how societies can become vulnerable to a single truth when they take for granted ideological, democratic, or national superiority. In the name of national unity, to take one example, citizens can easily become intolerant toward political disagreement. Just like Crick's defense of politics, this book can be read as a denunciation of intolerance toward political disagreement; an intolerance, I would argue, that is encouraged by the media.

There is a context that partly explains why journalists write about political disagreement the way they do. Spectacular disagreements have entertainment value, which certainly attracts readers.[17] Journalistic norms encouraging a less spectacular coverage of politics might also result in large portions of the population no longer reading the political pages of newspapers, leaving them ill-informed about politics. I honestly do not know which is worse: citizens lacking information on politics or citizens who are misinformed, having the wrong idea about what politics really is. I would be willing to take the risk of journalistic norms encouraging a gentler and more realistic coverage of politics.

Back in 1962, Crick had already identified a contextual element that might further explain intolerance toward political disagreement. In fact, he points at a desire for certainty that characterizes modern societies, which nourishes hopes for painless technological, scientific, or administrative responses to political problems. Technology, science,

---

[15] Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 108.

[16] Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 3–4.

[17] Stuart N. Soroka, *Negativity in Democratic Politics: Causes and Consequences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

and administration, Crick argues, are elements capable of producing
solutions with such alleged efficiency that any temptation to disagree is
quashed. These elements are typically the purview of more or less
informal clubs, whose membership is reserved to those with the right
diploma and professional accreditation. In technological civilizations,
these diplomas and professional accreditations serve to distinguish
trustworthy sources of information from unreliable ones. The members
of medical colleges, for example, are trusted to know which medical
information is credible and which is not, just as the members of
specialized engineering associations are relied on to understand various
technological matters. Technological civilizations elevate these clubs to
a status that is high enough to dissuade those without sufficient training
from disagreeing with club members. Journalists, who are asked to
cover a wide range of issues, rarely master technology, science, and
administration; they rarely are members of the clubs. Journalists, none-
theless, grant the clubs an enviable status, just as most individuals do.
The certainty promised by technology, science, and administration
reassures individuals, for whom politics is little more than bickering
at the expense of society's advancement. Journalists use the members of
these clubs in their reporting in ways that satisfy our technological
civilization's desire of certainty. Technological civilizations picture a
trained elite that is just as certain about solutions to societies' problems
as the engineer is certain that a given bridge design can support heavy
loads across a wide river. The engineer, Crick writes, "is to be the true
hero-citizen of our times: he will rescue us from the dilemmas of politics
and the pangs of hunger (and envy?) if 'left alone to get on with his job,'
free from, in various circumstances, the intrusions of the politicians, the
businessmen, the bureaucrats, the generals, or the priests."[18]

Since 1962, the respect for and influence of engineers and other
professionals that can offer sure solutions have continued expanding
far beyond the field of the material world. Take, for instance, the
environment of policy-making. In this field, the number of analytic
and administrative functions performed by specialists[19] in a manner
reminiscent of the production of solutions with physical certainty by
engineers has grown substantially over the past 50 years. Some of these

[18] Crick, *In Defence of Politics*, 72–73.
[19] That is to say, by members of self-regulated professions that promote
procedures to produce administrative and policy certainty.

professionalized functions include political communication, planning, evaluation, prospective analysis, and surveying. The proliferation of engineer-like professions in the policy environment can be taken as evidence that the social desire for certainty remains strong, which makes the preference of journalists (and citizen groups) for technical solutions over political ones a little more understandable.

This book is a defense of politics, but not a book against science, technology, and administration. In it, I may condemn a certain popular conception of these elements, but I recognize their usefulness, even in the human environment of policy-making. Several policy actors who participated in my research over the past ten years have a specific scientific expertise that makes their insight into policy development indispensable. Thanks to their scientific knowledge and methods, these actors can sometimes provide precise answers to specific questions. Depending on the academic discipline in which they were trained or on their personal values, however, these actors will more often than not raise the awareness of decision-makers and of other interested parties about unforeseen problems and potential pitfalls. Scientific expertise helps in disclosing blind spots and increases the tractability of problems, but rarely in such a way as to close policy debates.[20] The importance of problems surely cannot be decided purely on scientific ground, but when expert scientists get policy-makers to realize the existence of problems, including problems arising from the policy options that they are contemplating, these experts provide a useful service. Scientific actors do not only raise tough questions, they also put forward alternative perspectives and solutions, while prudently warning that these perspectives and solutions also carry some uncertainty. Aware that their perspective might thus fail at providing fail-safe solutions, these actors accept disagreement as a normal state of things.[21] I discuss the place of scientific expertise in policy-making at length in Chapter 6. For now, suffice it to say that many citizens and journalists seem to adhere to a different conception of scientific

[20] An excellent illustration of how science participates in policy debates can be found in Martin Lodge and Kira Matus, "Science, Badgers, Politics: Advocacy Coalitions and Policy Change in Bovine Tuberculosis Policy in Britain," *Policy Studies Journal* 42, no. 3 (August 2014): 367–90.

[21] Mike Hulme, *Why We Disagree about Climate Change: Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 75.

expertise: one that yields unequivocal answers to policy problems. They prefer to assume that science, technology, and administration provide not just certainty, but in fact represent substitutes for politics. As I argue in this book, this conception of science, technology, and administration is misleading. Control over a body of knowledge is part of politics, increasingly so, and this is for the better. Expertise and science should therefore not be viewed as things that are outside of politics; they are smack-dab in the middle of politics and can, nonetheless, make positive contributions to policy decisions.

Anyone with a desire for certainty in policy-making environments will be shocked by the suggestion that science is entangled with politics. They may reply that bad science is politics, but not the proper science taught in established knowledge institutions. The science of interest groups may be politics, they might add, but not the science of serious scientists. Of course, distinctions of this sort cannot always be made in a straightforward way. Even scientists from serious knowledge institutions cannot escape entanglement in political controversies; as a result, they rarely if ever come across as completely neutral policy-making informants.[22] Consequently, an individual is more likely to trust a scientist whose advice fits with his or her political preferences, regardless of evidence.[23] Individuals are also prone to disregarding scientists who produce competing claims,[24] arguing that they practice bad science or that they work under the influence of interest groups.

Arguing that science cannot be disentangled from politics, or that it usually fails to produce the unambiguous policy guidance frequently

[22] Karin Ingold and Muriel Gschwend, "Science in Policy-Making: Neutral Experts or Strategic Policy-Makers?," *West European Politics* 37, no. 5 (September 3, 2014): 993–1018; Carol L. Silva, Hank C. Jenkins-Smith, and Richard P. Barke, "Reconciling Scientists' Beliefs about Radiation Risks and Social Norms: Explaining Preferred Radiation Protection Standards," *Risk Analysis* 27, no. 3 (June 2007): 755–73.

[23] Dan M. Kahan et al., "The Polarizing Impact of Science Literacy and Numeracy on Perceived Climate Change Risks," *Nature Climate Change*, May 27, 2012; Erick Lachapelle, Éric Montpetit, and Jean-Philippe Gauvin, "Public Perceptions of Expert Credibility on Policy Issues: The Role of Expert Framing and Political Worldviews: Expert Framing and Political Worldviews," *Policy Studies Journal* 42, no. 4 (November 2014): 674–97.

[24] Charles S. Taber and Milton Lodge, "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 3 (July 2006): 755–69.