

DO POLITICIANS PANDER?

ABSTRACT: *In Politicians Don't Pander, Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro show that politicians follow public opinion much less slavishly than conventional wisdom suggests. However, the case studies they themselves rely on show that public opinion constrains policy makers more than they claim. Conversely, to the extent that political leaders are able to ignore the public's wishes, Jacobs and Shapiro do not adequately consider the possibility that this is due in large part to severe voter ignorance of public policy. In urging greater obedience to the popular will, the authors also overlook the danger that increased adherence to the often internally contradictory wishes of the electorate may be impossible or undesirable.*

Few complaints about American politics are more often heard than the claim that politicians pander excessively to the vicissitudes of public opinion. Our political leaders, assert pundits from across the political spectrum, are hamstrung by mindless adherence to the dictates of polls and campaign consultants who seek to follow the slightest mood swings of voters (Patterson 1994; Safire 1996; Lewis 1993; King 1997). Increasingly sophisticated methods for measuring and tracking public opinion are alleged to have exacerbated this tendency (Geer 1996). In their important recent work *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), political scientists Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro pose a formidable challenge to this conventional wisdom by examining two major episodes in recent American political history: the defeat of Presi-

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dent Bill Clinton's health-care plan in 1993–94 and the political failure of Newt Gingrich's Republican Congress in 1995–96.

Jacobs and Shapiro make an important contribution to our understanding of the interaction between public opinion and policy making. Yet their argument fails to take adequate account of the impact of voter ignorance on this interaction. Moreover, the ultimate defeat of the Clinton and Gingrich policy initiatives arguably reflects the existence of stronger public opinion-induced constraints on politicians than the authors are willing to concede.

Manipulation or Constraint?

Jacobs and Shapiro's most striking finding is that in formulating their policy proposals, both Clinton Democrats and Gingrich Republicans viewed public opinion as a target for manipulation rather than as a source of constraint. Instead of tailoring their policies to the dictates of the popular will, these leaders sought to manipulate the public into accepting proposals that they sought to enact for ideological and interest-based reasons. Moreover, Clinton, Gingrich, and their allies sought to swing public opinion in their favor not by persuading Americans based on the merits of reasoned and detailed arguments, but by using "crafted talk" to tap into inchoate feelings and biases that favored the proposal being put forward (106–108). As one Clinton aide put it during the health-care battle, the president and his advisers believed that they could "get away with anything provided you believe in something, you say it over and over again, and you never change" (106). Similarly, the Republicans thought that they could successfully sell their policies to the public so long as they could "stay on message" and "get everybody saying the same thing," as then-Republican National Committee Chairman Haley Barbour put it (273). Far from facilitating greater adherence to public opinion, survey research and other technical innovations were used to find ways to maneuver the public into supporting political leaders' and activists' own agendas (chs. 5–6).

Thus, the Clinton health-care proposal was put together with little or no attention to public preferences; instead, the administration sought to achieve its policy goal of cost containment, satisfy the demands of key Democratic-leaning interest groups, and win the support of members of Congress (95–103). In doing so, they rejected a number of policy options that had considerably more support in public-opinion sur-

veys than those ultimately adopted (*ibid.*). The Republican 104th Congress likewise deliberately promoted several major policies—particularly on Medicare and environmental policy—that were known to be unpopular with large majorities of the general public (266–72).

These findings are particularly important in that both the Clinton health-care plan and the Republican Contract with America addressed highly prominent issues that were widely debated in the press. Earlier scholars have generally assumed that public opinion constraints on policymakers should be unusually strong in such cases, where the issues at stake are highly visible and salient (e.g., Arnold 1990; Somin 1998). Health-care policy was rated the number-one concern of the public in surveys taken in 1993–94, and the Republican effort to roll back “big government” posed a major challenge to the very heart of the contemporary American political economy. Jacobs and Shapiro contest the prevailing view on some of its strongest ground. If politicians are able to flout public opinion in these highly prominent cases, surely they are even more likely to do so with respect to the vast bulk of other policy decisions, many of which may escape public scrutiny almost entirely.

On the basis of the evidence gathered from their two cases, the authors conclude that the present American political system provides insufficient “responsiveness” to public opinion. The picture they paint is a major challenge to conventional wisdom, and even to some of their own well-known prior works—which portrayed a coherent, consistent public opinion able to exercise substantial influence over policy outcomes (Page and Shapiro 1992; Jacobs 1993). In *Politicians Don’t Pander*, the authors are much less optimistic, and they propose that responsiveness be heightened by means of increased opportunities for citizen involvement in policy debates and improved press coverage of politicians’ distance from “centrist” public opinion (chs. 9–10).

The Neglected Role of Voter Ignorance

Jacobs and Shapiro’s conclusion, that politicians routinely ignore public opinion even on major, highly prominent policy issues, raises an obvious question: why don’t voters punish these recalcitrant politicians at the polls? After all, aspiring rivals of incumbent politicians have every incentive to point out the incumbents’ deviations from adherence to voter preferences.

The most likely answer is that, in many cases, voters are simply unaware of what the politicians are doing. Decades' worth of survey research has shown that the majority of voters are unaware of even very basic political information, such as the key precepts of liberal and conservative ideology or the division of responsibilities between the three branches of government (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1991 and 1996; Somin 1998; Converse 1964 and 1975; Bennett 1988 and 1989; Smith 1989).

It is not surprising, therefore, that many people were, especially at first, unaware of the extent to which Clinton's and Gingrich's policy proposals differed from their preferences. To be sure, Clinton's and Gingrich's political opponents were quick to claim that they had adopted radical policies at odds with public opinion; such information cues from "opinion leaders" can galvanize opposition to policies at odds with majority preferences (Stimson 1990; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). But poorly informed voters cannot easily determine whether they should credit such self-serving opposition claims or, alternatively, accept the inevitable denials of the incumbents.¹

One of Jacobs and Shapiro's most interesting findings is that both Democratic (101-102) and Republican (266-70) strategists perceived the general public as having low political knowledge and competence. They therefore concluded that popular preferences were a poor guide to public policy and easily subject to manipulation (101-102, 269-73). This pessimistic evaluation of the voting public is widely shared among American political elites of both major parties (Pew 1998). While such sentiments by political leaders may in part stem from self-serving elitism, they are supported by years of public-opinion research demonstrating extremely low levels of citizen knowledge.²

Voter ignorance created both opportunities and constraints for Clinton and Gingrich. On the one hand, as Jacobs and Shapiro point out, they offered political leaders the tempting prospect of shaping voter preferences to fit elite agendas. In an interesting case of borrowing from social-science research, both the Clinton Administration and the Republican Congress recognized that generally ignorant and inattentive voters could be "primed" into supporting policies that contained major elements that they opposed through carefully crafted messages that associated the policies with broadly supported goals and values (106, 271-74).³ The more poorly informed voters are, the more vulnerable they are to manipulation by "priming" (Zaller 1992; Kinder and Sanders 1990; Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

While Jacobs and Shapiro deplore Clinton's and Gingrich's at-

tempts at manipulation, they fail to adequately appreciate that such manipulation was in part a result of the severe constraints that voter ignorance impose on political leaders. Because most voters rarely if ever think carefully and systematically about their policy preferences, they often hold contradictory values and opinions (Zaller 1992; Bennett and Bennett 1990).⁴ As Jacobs and Shapiro themselves note, majorities of voters in 1995–96 supported the Republicans’ general goal of reducing the size and scope of government and balancing the budget, but simultaneously also opposed cuts in almost all major domestic policy programs (266–67).⁵ Similarly, strong majorities supported the Clinton Administration’s goals of universal access to health care and cost-containment, but opposed many of its specific proposals for expanding government control over medical care (95–100).

Although Jacobs and Shapiro note the existence of these internal contradictions in public opinion, they fail to consider the full extent of their significance. Quite simply, Clinton and Gingrich could not have followed the dictates of majority opinion even if they had wanted to do so. For they could not implement one set of public preferences without going against another, which would leave them politically vulnerable. For instance, the Republicans could reduce the size and scope of government or they could protect and expand all the major spending and regulatory programs that enjoy strong public support; but they could not possibly have done both. Faced with such dilemmas, even a leader more respectful of public opinion than Clinton or Gingrich might have been forced to resort to dissimulation to avoid political disaster.

In sum, voter ignorance provided opportunities for Clinton and Gingrich to implement agendas they and their partisan supporters favored, but also left them vulnerable to opinion backlash regardless of which policies they chose to adopt. Even worse—from Jacobs and Shapiro’s standpoint—ignorance-induced internal contradictions in public opinion make it impossible for politicians to fully adhere to popular dictates even when they are willing to take the political risk that entails.

Constrained Constraints on State Autonomy

Jacobs and Shapiro’s thesis that politicians systematically ignore “centrist public opinion” derives support from the initial content of Clinton’s

and Gingrich's policy agendas. Yet it should be remembered that many of the elements of their agendas most at odds with public opinion were eventually dropped even by the parties that initially proposed them. After the final defeat of the Clinton health plan in 1994, the Democratic party gave up trying to achieve comprehensive change of any kind in health-care policy, instead opting for modest incremental measures such as the Kennedy-Kassebaum Act. Likewise, since the defeat of Gingrich, followed by his eventual resignation in the wake of his equally unpopular support of President Clinton's impeachment, radical policy proposals emanating from the Republican Congress have been notable by their absence. Indeed, as Jacobs and Shapiro recount, President Clinton was able to outmaneuver the Republicans in 1995-96 in part by learning from his own earlier failures. Following the advice of political strategist Dick Morris,⁶ the president deliberately positioned himself in the center, coopting those elements of the Republican agenda that had broad support in public opinion and forcefully opposing those that did not (277-91).

Obviously, these setbacks to Clinton's and Gingrich's unpopular initiatives cannot be considered to be simple triumphs of an active, alert centrist citizenry. Instead, as Jacobs and Shapiro point out, they owed much to the very sorts of political manipulation that Clinton and Gingrich had tried to use to build up support for their proposals in the first place. Moreover, the eventual outcomes of the two cases, while arguably more reflective of majority public opinion than Clinton's and Gingrich's original proposals, still deviated from public preferences substantially. In the health-care case, the widely supported goals of expanded coverage and cost containment were not achieved. Similarly, the price of giving up the more radical elements of Gingrich's agenda was the failure to achieve the widely supported goal of reducing the size and scope of the federal government.

It is not even clear that Clinton and Gingrich's initiatives were complete failures from the standpoint of their advocates. Although Republican conservatives failed to achieve their most ambitious goals, they did force President Clinton to accept a quite conservative welfare bill in 1996 and an accelerated balanced-budget plan in 1997. It is at least arguable that these compromises were more favorable to the Republicans than those that might have arisen if they had taken a less aggressive stance in 1995-96. President Clinton's health-care plan was arguably less productive of major policy changes than Gingrich's 1995 initiatives. Nonetheless, it may have paved the way for

more modest liberal health-care legislation such as the Kennedy-Kassebaum Bill, and it certainly blocked conservative proposals that sought to reform health care by reducing the federal government's role rather than expanding it (Epstein 1997; Goodman and Musgrave 1993).

Even so, the two cases examined by Jacobs and Shapiro provide much more equivocal support for their thesis than they claim. After all, Clinton's and Gingrich's most unpopular proposals suffered defeat and their authors paid a substantial political price. Gingrich's later, equally unpopular support for Clinton's impeachment eventually led to the premature end of the House Speaker's political career in 1998. At the very least, the lesson that pundits and political strategists led by Clinton adviser Dick Morris drew from these two episodes was that flouting centrist public opinion poses severe risks for politicians. Morris's strategy of "triangulation" sought to reposition Clinton in the center precisely to avoid these risks (Morris 1999).

While Jacobs and Shapiro effectively demonstrate that politicians are far from being the slavish prisoners of opinion polls portrayed by many pundits, they arguably go too far in discounting the very real constraints that public opinion continues to impose on our leaders. In addition, they fail to consider the possibility that, to the extent that politicians *are* able to ignore the public's wishes, it may be a consequence of voter ignorance. Such voter ignorance not only allows politicians to ignore and manipulate the public's wishes; it also leads to contradictions that often make it all but impossible for political leaders to satisfy one public preference without frustrating others.

Finally, the existence of deep and widespread voter ignorance should lead us to question whether the increased "democratic responsiveness" to popular preferences that Jacobs and Shapiro advocate is actually desirable. While the authors argue that increased responsiveness will diminish public cynicism about and mistrust of government (ch. 9), this claim, even if correct, does not address the danger that close adherence to ill-informed public opinion might lead to disastrous, internally contradictory policies. Even so, Jacobs and Shapiro should not be blamed too greatly for failing to resolve this longstanding issue in political theory. *Politicians Don't Pander* remains a valuable contribution to our empirical knowledge of American politics even if we have reservations about the authors' normative stance. Future research can build on their work and shed further light on the extent

to which politicians merely pander to the people's wishes or actively manipulate them.

NOTES

1. For a criticism of such opinion-leader models on the grounds that poorly informed voters have difficulty deciding which opinion leaders to trust, see Somin 1998 and Somin 1999.
2. For the most comprehensive survey of the evidence, see Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996.
3. For some of the more important social-science works on priming, see Iyengar and Kinder 1987 and Zaller 1992.
4. Such contradictions are to be differentiated from a situation where an individual knowingly values two opposed goals while recognizing the conflict between them. Most poorly informed voters, however, seem to be unaware of the conflicts among their different commitments (Zaller 1992), and this seems to have been the case with the two episodes discussed in *Politicians Don't Pander*.
5. This is part of a longstanding pattern of public opposition to "big government" in general combined with support for expanding most specific major government programs (Bennett and Bennett 1990; McCloskey and Zaller 1984).
5. For Morris's own account, see Morris 1999.

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