

Matthew Weinshall

MEANS, ENDS, AND PUBLIC IGNORANCE IN  
HABERMAS'S THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

ABSTRACT: According to the principles derived from his theory of discourse ethics, Habermas's model of deliberative democracy is justified only if the public is capable of making political decisions that advance the common good. Recent public-opinion research demonstrates that the public's overwhelming ignorance of politics precludes it from having such capabilities, even if radical measures were taken to thoroughly educate the public about politics or to increase the salience of politics in their lives.

Habermas's theory of deliberative democracy is intended for times like these. In *Between Facts and Norms* (1996, 2-3), he explains the relevance of his project:

The development of constitutional democracy along the celebrated "North Atlantic" path has certainly provided us with results worth preserving, but once those who do not have the good fortune to be heirs of the Founding Fathers turn to their own traditions, they cannot find criteria and reasons that would allow them to distinguish what is worth preserving from what should be rejected.

When such countries as Afghanistan, Cambodia, and Iraq attempt to rebuild after wars, failed regimes, or coups, they must decide, as Habermas says, which institutions

are "worth preserving and what should be rejected." In light of the success that modern, industrialized democracies have achieved, these "failed states" might look to adopt democratic institutions. However, when states try to establish democratic institutions too quickly, the transitions generally fail, partly because they lack civil societies with a strong commitment to the legitimacy and appropriateness of democratic institutions (Massing 2002). Habermas attempts to create the foundation for such a commitment with his theory, albeit a complex and philosophical foundation.

The relevance of Habermas's theory of democracy also extends to states that already have established democratic institutions. By providing a philosophical justification for democracy, his theory explicates the "normative core" or the underlying ideal of real-world democracy, which can also be used to evaluate the adequacy and legitimacy of extant democratic practices (Habermas 1994, 3). Seyla Benhabib (1994, 41-42) makes a similar point when she discusses her understanding of the purpose of Habermasian democratic theory:

I understand such a theory to be elucidating the already implicit principles and logic of existing democratic practices. Among the practices which such a theory of democracy can elucidate are the significance of deliberative bodies in democracies, the rationale of parliamentary opposition, the need for a free and independent media and sphere of public opinion, and the rationale for employing majority rule as a decision procedure.

Since Habermas's theory explicates what underlies democracy, it can be used to critically assess existing democratic institutions. As Michael Rosen (1994, 4) puts it, Habermas develops a theory of democracy so that he can act as "both defender and critic of democracy."

## I. HABERMAS'S DISCOURSE

## THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

Habermas's theory, which he calls a "discourse theory of democracy," can be broken down into two components: his theory of discourse ethics, and his model of deliberative democracy. Discourse ethics is a theory about the ethical implications of the presuppositions that people must make when they participate in a discourse. Deliberative democracy is a procedural model of politics that favors universal and unconstrained deliberation about issues of public concern, rather than the mere collection of independent opinions through voting. I will examine Habermas's justification for and model of democracy by probing the relationship between these two components.

Distinguishing between discourse ethics and the deliberative model can be difficult and confusing, because they both focus on the importance of discourse or communication. But my central argument is that they do not necessarily fit together. Habermas asserts that his model of deliberative democracy follows from his theory of discourse ethics. I will challenge this assertion by arguing that it is an empirical question whether or not discourse ethics justifies deliberative democracy. Habermas implicitly makes empirical claims about the mass public's ability to become politically knowledgeable, which I will contest by surveying recent empirical research about the mass public's ignorance about politics. If Habermas's model of deliberative democracy does not, in fact, follow from his theory of discourse ethics, then discourse ethics may justify a totally different, nondemocratic form of government, defeating Habermas's goal of producing a universally compelling justification for and model of democracy.

## Why Democratic Deliberation Must Take Place

The general goal of Habermas's project of discourse ethics is to develop a just method of resolving moral

conflicts in a pluralistic society, in which the authority of one set of sacred texts or other authorities does not enjoy universal and politically legitimating support (Rehg 1994, 33).

Habermas's primary target is ethical skepticism, which holds that norms cannot be considered objectively right or wrong in the same way that empirical claims can be true or false. As a self-proclaimed ethical cognitivist, Habermas disagrees with this assessment of reason's futility in the realm of morality. He argues that a skeptical conception of norms is inconsistent with our understanding and experience of the justifiability and non-arbitrariness of norms. He writes:

When employing normative utterances in everyday life, we raise claims to validity that we are prepared to defend against criticism. When we discuss moral-practical questions of the form "What ought I to do?" we presuppose that the answers need not be arbitrary; we trust our ability to distinguish in principle between right and wrong ones. (Habermas 1990, 56.)

Even though Habermas observes that we understand and experience norms as being objectively right or wrong, he does admit that norms cannot be proven to be true or false in the same way that empirical claims can. "Normative statements cannot be verified or falsified; that is, they cannot be tested in the same way as descriptive statements" (1990, 54). From this fact, skeptics conclude that the justifiability of norms is an illusion, and that normative statements are really expressions of subjective experience. Moral or normative statements, according to this thinking, would be more accurately expressed with other types of sentences, which cannot make claims to truth and cannot be defended by rational arguments.

In response, Habermas (1990, 56) maintains that even though normative statements cannot be right or wrong in the same sense that empirical or descriptive statements can be true or false, norms do make claims to

validity that are "analogous to truth claims." Rather than dismiss the intuition that norms are justifiably valid or invalid, which our experience confirms, Habermas attempts to explain the meaning of this experience of moral truth, or more accurately, normative rightness (ibid.). To achieve this goal, he investigates how people develop a belief in a norm's moral rightness. "It is only their claim to general validity that gives an interest, a volition, or a norm the dignity of moral authority" (ibid., 49). According to Habermas, believing in a norm's claim to "general validity" is synonymous with thinking that others will believe that it is valid as well, or in his words, that it holds intersubjectively. He further concludes that such a belief in a norm's intersubjective validity, or moral rightness, rests on the rational arguments that support or justify the norm. The sense of an obligation to follow a norm comes from the belief that other rational people, given our reasons for upholding the norm, would agree that it is justified, or right, and hence would follow it if they were in the same situation. "To say that I ought to do something means that I have good reasons for doing it" (ibid., 49, emphasis original), Habermas writes; and "valid norms must deserve recognition by all concerned" (ibid., emphasis original).

These insights lead Habermas (1990, 66) to posit his Discourse Principle: "Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse." He believes that this principle is implicit in our acceptance of a norm's validity claim. In order to think that something is valid, you must think that it is not simply your perspective that makes it seem convincing, but that other rational people, if given the same supporting reasons, would also think that it is valid; in other words, the source of a norm's motivating power is the sense that its validity lies beyond oneself.

In essence, Habermas is providing a discourse-centered definition of objective validity. While it may seem

like common sense to argue that when we accept a norm, we implicitly believe that the norm is objectively valid or justified, it is novel to define objective validity as the result of an actual discourse. The crucial connection in this view is between the quality of the supporting reasons and their potential to generate universal support for a norm among other people. Of course, one could carry out an independent and isolated thought experiment to test if a reason were strong enough to generate such support, but the only way to determine, for certain, if an argument would convince others to support a norm is to enter into an actual discourse.

Only an intersubjective process of reaching understanding can produce an agreement that is reflexive in nature; only it can give the participants the knowledge that they have collectively become convinced by something. (Habermas 1990, 67.)

The Discourse principle, which defines validity as the product of an actual discourse, raises an important question: what constitutes such a discourse? Habermas's answer to this question eventually leads him to posit a second principle, the principle of Universalization, which states that a norm is valid if

all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone's interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities). (Habermas 1990, 65.)

Habermas arrives at this principle by analyzing the unavoidable, and hence universal or necessary, presuppositions that people must make about the conditions of a discourse in order to believe that the results of that discourse are valid (1990, 81). He argues that one must presuppose that the following conditions are fulfilled:

1. Every subject with the competence to speak and act is allowed to take part in a discourse.

2a. everyone is allowed to question any assertion whatever;

b. everyone is allowed to introduce any assertion whatever into the discourse;

c. everyone is allowed to express his attitudes, desires, and needs.

3. No speaker may be prevented, by internal or external coercion, from exercising his rights as laid down in (1) and (2). (Ibid., 89.)

To assemble this list, Habermas relies on the work of Karl-Otto Apel and R. Alexy, who argue that those who participate in a discourse but do not make these presuppositions engage in performative contradictions.

The basic premise of these conditions is that in order to think that a result is accurate, or valid, you must propose that you are taking into account all and not excluding any relevant data, which must be produced by people in some form of discourse. It would be unrealistic to assume that one had considered all relevant data if certain people were excluded from presenting their points of view or were coerced into staying quiet. Habermas (1990, 91-92) calls his three necessary presuppositions "rules of discourse" because even though they do not constitute a discourse in the way that rules of a game constitute the game, these conditions need to be fulfilled, as much as possible, in order to produce a valid result.

Habermas simply claims that the principle of Universalization "follows" from these rules (1990, 93). For the purpose of my essay, though, it is necessary to explore the precise mechanism of this derivation.

The only way, I believe, to derive the principle from these rules is to imagine an ideal discourse including every affected and competent person. The most important condition that must be realized in order to make a discourse ideal is not a complete fulfillment of the three rules, although that still must occur, but rather, that participants must have complete knowledge of the ex-

pected effects of the norm in question upon their interests.

Habermas hints at this ideal requirement in the first rule by restricting discourse to only those "with the competence to speak and act"; similarly, he later refers to the inclusion of only those with "the capacity to take part in argumentation" (Habermas 1990, 89). Although he does not explicitly define "capacity" or "competence" as having complete knowledge of the effects that a norm is expected to have for one's interests, without such knowledge, it would be illogical to assume that a norm will indeed satisfy the interests of each individual.

For instance, if a discourse followed the three rules, but all participants did not have an adequate amount of knowledge of their interests or of whether the general observance of a norm would advance their interests, then a valid norm, according to the principle of Universalization, could be reached only as a result of chance or good fortune, because some participants would not have adequate means to ensure that the outcome of the discourse benefitted them. According to the basic premise of the three rules—that all relevant data must be considered in order to confer validity on a discourse—we would not deem the results of such a discourse valid. If all the conditions of an ideal discourse are fulfilled, then it is logical to claim that the resulting norm satisfies not only the Discourse but the Universalization principle because the only way to secure universal consensus would be to construct a norm that was expected to advance everyone's interests.

Building the demanding requirement that everyone be completely knowledgeable about his interests into the picture of an ideal discourse, and hence into Habermas's explication of the principle of Universalization, is not problematic in itself. At this point, Habermas does not need to consider the public's practical ability to obtain and utilize political information, because discourse ethics is a descriptive moral theory: it describes and



reconstructs the principles that are inherent in basic communication and our common understanding of morality. Through his analysis of an ideal discourse that we must all regard as valid, Habermas aims to show that everyone already accepts the principle of Universalization, which essentially states that valid norms must consider and advance everyone's interests equally. However, to then argue that discourse ethics justifies his model of deliberative democracy does require Habermas to make empirical claims. He must be able to prove that his model of deliberative democracy has the potential to create policies that satisfy his principle of Universalization, since only those policies could be considered valid.

### Democratic Deliberation in Theory and in Practice

Without explicitly referring to them as such, Habermas does indeed make empirical claims of this type so as to justify his model of deliberative democracy. He contends that in properly structured democratic institutions, the only influential force will be the "force of the better argument." In other words, people will be persuaded only by rational arguments and not by factors external to the quality of those arguments, such as threats of violence. I interpret this as a claim about the instrumental rationality or desirability of discursive outcomes: better or more rational results will be produced through discourse that approximates Habermas's ideal democratic model.

Benhabib (1994, 32) interprets the claim in this way too. "According to the deliberative model, procedures of deliberation generate legitimacy as well as assuring some degree of practical rationality." Benhabib argues that deliberation will produce more rational decisions for three reasons. First, deliberation informs its participants of positions and ideas of which they were previously unaware. Second, when people partici-

pate in a deliberation, their preferences become more clear to them and they become more capable of weighing their preferences against those of others. And third, when people need to articulate reasons in support of their preferences, they begin to appreciate what counts as a better argument and to adopt "the standpoint of all involved" (ibid., 32-33). It is important to recognize that all three of Benhabib's claims are empirical, so that if they can be disproved by empirical data, her justification of actual democratic discourse loses its cogency.

Habermas's discussion of the tension between facts and norms, or between facticity and validity, provides more support for Benhabib's attribution of practical or instrumental rationality to the deliberative model. "Between facts and norms," the title of Habermas's recent book, refers to the tension between the social force of norms or laws and the actual reasons why they are implemented (Rehg 1996, xi). When rules are formed through communicative action or discourse, they achieve their social force or enforceability through the solidarity or understanding that the communication creates; in other words, people follow the law because they know why it is in place and agree with the normative rationale for its existence. In reality, though, most people follow laws because of their sheer social facticity; if they don't follow the law, they might suffer some penalty.

Moreover, other forces of social integration, namely the market and bureaucracy, have become more powerful than communicative action, which means that people have less understanding and control over the forces that influence them. Habermas's goal, through his deliberative model, is to alter the balance of power between these forces of social integration. He writes:

A radical-democratic change in the process of legitimation aims at a new balance between the forces of social integration so that the social-integrative power of solidarity—the "communicative force of production"—can prevail over the powers of the other two control re-

sources, i.e., money and administrative power, and therewith successfully assert the practically oriented demands of the lifeworld. (Habermas 1992, 444.)

If this were where Habermas's analysis ended, his advocacy of communicative action would seem to rest on a belief that people should have more control over their lives because such control is an intrinsically good thing. A closer reading of Habermas's work, though, reveals that his desire to resolve the tension between facticity and validity is grounded in a belief that doing so will advance the common good by producing rational norms and laws—in that they will advance the common good.

### Habermasian Democracy as Instrumentally Valuable

This interpretation, that Habermas bases his advocacy of the deliberative model on a belief that it will produce rational outcomes that are instrumental to the common good, may be controversial, but it is well supported by his writings.

First, Habermas establishes the connection between communicative action, or discourse, and rationality. He writes, "The theory of communicative action intends to bring into the open the rational potential intrinsic in everyday communicative practices" (1992, 442). Next, he makes it clear that rationality refers not just to the rationality of the procedure, but of the outcomes as well. He writes that "the burden of proof shifts from the morality of citizens to the conduciveness of specific processes of the democratic formation of opinion and will, presumed to have the potential for generating rational outcomes, of actually leading to such results" (*ibid.*, 446). Finally, he explicitly defines these "rational outcomes" as outcomes that advance the common good:

The discourse-centered concept of democracy places its faith in the political mobilization and utilization of the communicative force of production. Yet, consequently, it has to be shown that social issues liable to generate conflicts are open to rational regulation, that is, regulation in the common interest of all parties involved. (Ibid., 447.)

Thus, the success and justification of Habermas's model of deliberative democracy depends on its ability to produce instrumentally rational results, in the sense of results that advance the common good.

In order to claim that the model does indeed achieve this goal, Habermas must assume that people have the ability to make instrumentally rational arguments that actually advance their interests. This assumption is less questionable in the realm of discourse ethics, where the information required to make such decisions is not very complex and is, by its nature, accessible to everyone. In the realm of politics, however, information and decisions can be far more complex; intricate and controversial theories and a great deal of complicated information must be used to determine whether a tax policy will have a particular economic effect or whether it is worthwhile to spend more money on national defense. To claim that an instrumentally rational outcome will be produced by democratic deliberation or discourse requires one to assume that the public is either very well informed or that it is capable of becoming adequately informed.

## II. POLITICAL IGNORANCE

While thinkers as far back as Plato have considered the implications for democratic theory of the public's limited knowledge of politically relevant information, the contemporary discussion of this issue originates with Walter Lippmann's *Public Opinion* (1922). The amazing insight and influence of this work, which contemporary political scientists such as John Zaller also recognize (1992, 6), become obvious in light of subsequent public-opinion re-

search. Eighty years ago, however, without the assistance of modern research techniques, Lippmann anticipated most of today's important findings and theories.

Lippmann investigated the public's understanding of politics because he recognized that a democracy can serve the interests of its citizens effectively only when those citizens have adequate and accurate knowledge of the world beyond their personal experiences (Lippman 1922, 314). The level and accuracy of the public's knowledge had not been previously investigated, Lippmann believes, because earlier defenders of democracy were concerned that revealing the public's inability to make informed decisions would undermine belief in the equal dignity of people (*ibid.*, 313). Lippmann argues that likewise, defenders of democracy tend to neglect many of the important interests that a government should advance because they excessively emphasize people's interest in self-government and self-determination as ends in themselves.

But as a matter of plain experience, self-determination is only one of many interests of a human personality. The desire to be the master of one's own destiny is a strong desire, but it has to adjust itself to other equally strong desires, such as a desire for a good life, for peace, for relief from burdens. (*Ibid.*, 310-11.)

Lippmann believes that due to the public's lack of knowledge about politics, these other strong and common interests may well be sacrificed by proponents of democracy who act as if collective self-determination were the only good that there is.

According to Lippmann, if we are to determine whether other important interests are being sacrificed, we must investigate the nature and content of the source of democratic political decisions, namely, public opinion. Of course, it is an empirical and controversial claim, which many scholars have challenged, that public opinion does indeed control modern democratic governments. To assess Habermas's discourse theory of democracy empirically, though, I am more interested in the general ability of the

public to become informed and to make informed decisions, rather than in whether their opinions do affect policy, as democratic theory holds that they should.

The epistemic general ability of the public is also the focus of Lippmann's work. He concludes first that the common understanding of public opinion as a unified and coherent will or consensus is incorrect; it is merely an illusion or simplification that politicians and political commentators utilize (1922, 194). What these political analysts commonly describe as "Public Opinion," which they derive from election results and surveys, is, in fact, a collection of many different and sometimes contradictory opinions, which Lippmann calls "the pictures inside the heads" of people regarding public affairs (*ibid.*, 29).

Then, like Habermas, Lippmann investigates the methods of effective speakers and politicians so as to understand how people's distinct opinions are thought in the aggregate to form the consensus that, to Lippman, is largely an illusion. By analyzing a speech by Charles Evans Hughes, in which Hughes attempts to minimize divisions among Republicans, Lippmann concludes that in order to avoid overt conflict and create the semblance of unity, effective politicians employ general statements and ideas that are vague enough to apply to a variety of people or correspond to many different types of internal pictures. To form these different pictures in the first place, however, Lippmann argues that people filter already incomplete reports of events mediated by sources like the press or friends, who convey this incomplete information by using simplistic stereotypes (1922, 79).

People must use stereotypes, Lippmann believes, in order to imagine complex events and integrate new information into their established imaginings of the world. Describing the source and function of these stereotypes, Lippmann writes:

For the most part we do not first see and then define, we define first and then see. In the great blooming confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that

which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture. (Ibid., 81.)

This practice of defining situations before actually experiencing them troubles Lippmann because it causes people to develop pictures in their heads or opinions about the world that do not correspond to reality.

Still, Lippmann (1922, 88) understands that it is "economical," and hence inevitable, for people to rely on stereotypes to understand the world; it requires too much time and effort to develop a detailed and unique understanding of each event. Such an individualized understanding is desirable when it is attainable, and Lippmann recognizes that people do indeed attain this deeper and more accurate understanding of events and other people in their immediate personal relationships (ibid., 88-89). Thus, although eliminating stereotypes about the wider world is not practicable or necessarily desirable, since they can be, on occasion, both economical and useful (ibid., 90), Lippmann believes that it is possible to make our understandings and opinions about what he calls the "invisible world"—the world beyond our immediate personal experiences—more realistic and accurate (ibid., 314).

Lippmann argues that there are two complementary ways to maintain the accuracy of our opinions. First, people may rely on experts, who have more complete and realistic understandings of the invisible world (1922, 31). Second, the performance of public officials may be objectively measured and recorded, so that people can receive the feedback necessary to decide whether an official is successful or not at advancing their interests (ibid., 314).

Most of Lippmann's insights into the formation and nature of public opinion have been confirmed by contemporary empirical research. As early as 1964, Phillip Converse, in "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," supported Lippmann's claim that a unified and coherent public opinion does not exist. Anthony Downs developed Lippmann's argument about the rational motivations for relying on stereotypes in *An Economic Theory of*

Democracy (1957). Samuel Popkin, and Arthur Lupia and Matthew McCubbins, further investigated (and celebrated) the use of stereotypes in *The Reasoning Voter* (1991) and *The Democratic Dilemma* (1998), respectively. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter advanced Lippmann's argument about the importance of educating the public in *What Americans Know about Politics and Why It Matters* (1996). In the rest of Part II, I will investigate these and other approaches to and explanations of the public's understanding of politics.

### Converse on the Uninformed Public

Confirming many of Lippmann's observations, Converse produces a general description of how members of the mass public think about politics. A crucial premise of his theory is that the distribution of politically relevant information in a modern society resembles a pyramid, with an information scale on the x axis and a percentage of the population on the y axis (Converse 1964, 256). A small group of people at the top of the pyramid is relatively well informed, while a much larger percentage of the population, represented by the wide base, is relatively ignorant.

Like Lippmann, Converse realizes that elite political actors, the group at the very top, and the mass public, which composes the rest of the pyramid, have fundamentally different understandings of politics. To Converse, this is because of "differences in the nature of [their] belief systems" (*ibid.*, 206). The crucial difference between their belief systems, or their collections of beliefs, is that elites organize their beliefs with a certain arguable consistency around abstract, complex ideas or principles, while the mass public organizes its beliefs around perceptions of group interests or of simple and concrete objects (*ibid.*, 213). For instance, a member of the cognitive elite's belief in education reform might be influenced by his position on free-market economics or federalism, which are abstract principles, while a less



informed citizen's belief on the same issue is more likely to be influenced by his experiences as a student or his observations of his child's school.

By surveying a cross-sectional sample of the electorate, Converse concluded that nearly 85 percent of the public did not (as of 1956) have an accurate understanding of the standard belief systems that American political elites use, such as liberal and conservative ideologies (1964, 218). He argues that the cause of this ignorance is the way that belief systems are transmitted through society. According to Converse (*ibid.*, 211), a small group of "creative synthesizers"—presumably theorists such as Karl Marx and Adam Smith—combine beliefs and principles into "packages," the components of which are then presented as logically belonging together in "natural wholes." The two aspects of these packages or belief systems, "what goes with what" and why they go together, must then be transmitted to others (*ibid.*, 212). The second, logical component is more difficult to transmit or communicate than the first because it involves abstract and complex principles that are hard to understand and explain (*ibid.*). Converse argues that those people who receive the most politically relevant information, the cognitive elites, are more apt to accept wide-ranging, "standard" belief systems or ideologies because the complex and abstract principles that organize and underlie those systems are most likely to reach them (*ibid.*, 213). The mass public, on the other hand, which receives much less information, will develop "narrower" and more individually eccentric belief systems, because unlike the elites, they do not have knowledge of the abstract principles that connect and "constrain" the beliefs of people who are more politically sophisticated (*ibid.*). Thus, for Converse, the correlation between politically relevant knowledge and belief system complexity is explained by information transmission: standard belief systems are composed of complex principles that are hard to transmit, so only those who pay enough attention to politics are likely to understand and employ them.

Perhaps another plausible explanation for this correlation between information awareness and belief-system complexity is that having a complex and wide-ranging belief system allows people to integrate and digest more information. Still, this explanation begs the question of why such a small proportion of the population accepts complex belief systems. Converse shows that "the ordering of individuals on this vertical information scale is largely due to education" (1964, 212). If indeed education affects the amount of ideological training that people receive, then high levels of education may explain the correlation between high information awareness and complex belief systems (ideologies). On the other hand, there may be another factor, such as intelligence, that explains the correlation between education, information awareness, and belief-system complexity. Regardless, Converse's finding that there are extreme differences between how elites and the mass public understand politics has been consistently confirmed (Somin 1998, 417).

Converse (1964, 213) recognizes that most well-informed political analysts and journalists are not aware of how politically unsophisticated the general public is because political elites usually interact with other people who, as members of the cognitive elite, have similarly complex belief systems. Like Lippmann, Converse argues that this overestimation of the mass public's knowledge of politics causes elites and analysts to routinely misinterpret mass political events. The most common misinterpretation occurs when elites attribute actual voter support, in the form of an election or a poll, to their own complex policy positions. "Here it is difficult to keep in mind that the true motivations and comprehensions of the supporters may have little or nothing to do with the distinctive beliefs of the endorsed elite" (*ibid.*, 249). More modern research confirms this tendency to misinterpret election results; for instance, while many Republicans and political analysts believed that Ronald Reagan's 1980 election victory represented the mass public's acceptance of his conservative agenda, exit polling indicated that vot-

ers simply did not like President Carter, and that they blamed him for the country's poor economic performance and for the Iran hostage-crisis (Friedman 1998, 398; Popkin 1991, 4). A similar and more recent instance of misinterpretation occurred when the new Republican majority, led by Newt Gingrich, attributed their 1994 landslide victory to the mass public's acceptance of their platform, the "Contract with America"; in fact, the majority of voters did not know what the "Contract" contained (Friedman 1998, 398).

If Converse is right and the mass public is overwhelmingly ignorant of the opinions and policy preferences of elite political actors, how does it make decisions in the voting booth? Converse's answer is that most people use heuristics to simplify their decisions and form opinions about particular issues that have more immediate relevance to them. Heuristics, like Lippmann's stereotypes, are information shortcuts or decision-making tools that are intended to allow people to make rational decisions without taking the time to consider all of the relevant information. Converse (1964, 217) discovered that (as of 1956) people most commonly relied on the "nature of the times" heuristic; a person who uses this shortcut bases his voting decision on a candidate's "temporal association in the past with broad societal states of war or peace, prosperity or depression." Thus if the economy is performing well or the country has been successful in a war, then this type of voter will typically support the incumbent.

The other prevalent technique that people use to make political decisions is to focus on a single issue. Even though it is economical to describe the mass public's political opinions as either liberal or conservative, Converse (1964, 245) argues that it is more accurate to describe the "fragmentation of the mass public into a plethora of narrower issue publics." "Issue publics" are composed of small groups of people who form an opinion on a particular issue that immediately concerns them (*ibid.*, 246). For instance, people who have strong opin-

ions about abortion but do not locate those opinions within a broader belief system constitute an abortion issue public. While elites or ideologically "sophisticated" people would recognize the putative relationship between this issue and others, Converse believes that most people do not possess such a "global" perspective on politics (*ibid.*, 246-247).

The many people who have simple and narrow belief systems may align themselves with a particular party due to the party's position on their primary issue of concern. Alternatively, Converse recognizes that many people align themselves with a particular party because of the groups that the party tends to support. For instance, people who support unions would join whichever party also tended to support unions. While it may be accurate to attach a party label to such people since they will be more likely to vote for a candidate of that party, Converse (1964, 216) argues that their belief systems are still very different from those of the elites of their party. The crucial differences are an understanding of the conceptual and principled foundations of the party's positions, and, in turn, a grasp of the party's actual positions on particular issues. For instance, while what Converse calls a "group interest" voter may know that Democrats tend to support her group, she will likely not know what the Democratic party position is on issues that do not directly concern her group, or even on issues that directly affect her group.

To further establish the mass public's ignorance of substantive policy matters, Converse examines the stability of survey respondents' opinions over time. Underlying this approach is the theory that high response instability, which he measures by asking people the same question at different times, indicates the absence of real and informed opinions. Unless an important intervening event occurs that causes people to reconsider their stances, we would expect those people who have strong and informed opinions on an issue to provide consistent and stable responses (Converse 1964, 241). He writes that

"the evidence seemed clear that extreme instability is associated with absence of information, or at least interest" (ibid., 245). Converse's data show that party affiliations were stably aligned with opinions about issues that directly affect a group, such as school desegregation during the 1950s, but that opinions on policies that have an indirect effect or are more complex, such as federal housing or federal control over utilities, exhibited a large amount of instability (ibid., 240).

Converse explains this finding by theorizing that people do indeed have real opinions about particular groups, but that in most instances, they do not have enough information to relate those preferences to particular issues and thus cannot form meaningful opinions about them (ibid., 241). Incorporating his group-interest explanation of party affiliation, Converse argues that people are usually more attached to a party than to the positions the party supports. "The party and the affect toward it are more central within the political belief systems of the mass public than are the policy ends that the parties are designed to pursue" (ibid., 241). This finding is paradoxical, because the sole purpose of a political party is to advance its policy preferences, which he refers to as "policy ends" (ibid., 240).

Converse (1964, 242) argues that the attitude instability data provide convincing support for a more general bifurcation of the public into two groups: well-informed elites who have stable opinions over time, and the uninformed public that does not have opinions on most issues and thus provides meaningless responses to surveys. In perhaps his most famous passage, he writes that "large portions of an electorate do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time" (ibid., 245).

Converse does admit that this two-group model is occasionally an oversimplification. Response instability can sometimes be produced by a third group that thoughtfully reconsiders its stance on an issue. Still, he contends that

this third potential group constitutes a small proportion of the population. Without an understanding of the "contextual information" regarding an issue, or of the underlying principles that constrain a standard belief system, it is impossible for most voters to predict a party's stance on particular issues. Thus while it is likely that many people will claim to belong to a political party and may even vote consistently for candidates from that party, they will likely be unable to deliberate rationally about the candidates' stances on particular issues, which is what Habermas's deliberative model of democracy requires.

I have examined Converse's essay in such extensive detail because almost all modern public-opinion research can be understood as responding to or building upon it. Most researchers have focused on Converse's claim that the mass public lacks meaningful opinions on most issues, which is commonly referred to as his "nonattitudes" theory. Others have attempted either to explain away, excuse, or provide solutions for the shocking amount of ignorance that his and subsequent studies have revealed.

### The Uninformed Public

Regardless of the direction or approach that they eventually take, almost all modern treatments of the public's understanding of politics start with Converse-like findings of widespread ignorance. Most scholars begin by defining the requisite amount of knowledge that citizens must possess in order to govern themselves effectively. W. Russell Neuman (1986, 197) argues that political knowledge consists of "political figures, issues, structures, and groups." Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996, 65) similarly hold that adequately informed citizens should know the "rules of the game, the substance of politics, and the people and parties." Still, some researchers, who advocate the "constructionist" approach, argue that establishing such an ideal standard

of rational citizenship unnecessarily sets most voters up for failure, leads to a pessimistic view of the public, and does not create meaningful insights about the political behavior of most citizens. Instead, according to the constructionist school, it is more valuable to ask "how do people become informed about the political world around them, and how do they use information they have acquired?" (Neuman quoted in Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 18).

In order to assess Habermas's justification of the deliberative model empirically, though, it is important to consider traditional measures of the public's knowledge in addition to constructionist questions, because if a majority of the public has shown a consistent inability to retain minimal amounts of politically relevant information, we may be able to conclude that in the absence of a miraculous solution to the problem of public ignorance, Habermas's discourse theory does not justify deliberative democracy. I will therefore discuss the common and consistent findings of widespread ignorance before exploring theories that dismiss the importance of these findings and others that attempt to rebut Converse's nonattitudes thesis.

According to data that Delli Carpini and Keeter collected from the Roper Center archives, the National Election Studies, and the authors' own 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge, the public's knowledge of political issues and "people and players" resembles the Conversean pyramid; however, the public's knowledge of general institutions and processes, or what they call the "rules of the game," resembles a diamond, where small groups of people at the tips of the diamond know very much about very little, and the majority in the middle of the diamond have some knowledge about many things (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 68). Still, a look at the actual numbers reveals that large proportions of the American public are ignorant of absolutely fundamental rules, issues, and people. In 1986, for example, only 55 percent of the survey sample knew the substance of

the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision; in 1983, only 50 percent knew that accused people are presumed innocent; in 1986, only 41 percent could define the Bill of Rights; in 1952, only 36 percent could define a primary election; in 1986, only 30 percent understood the substance of *Roe v. Wade*; in 1952, a mere 27 percent could name two branches of government; in 1989, only 20 percent could name two First Amendment rights, and only 2 percent could name two Fifth Amendment rights (*ibid.*, 70-71).

Some scholars argue that such survey findings are insignificant because they test only the public's knowledge of political trivia, which does not reveal the public's ability to make rational decisions (Popkin 1991). In response, survey researchers such as Delli Carpini and Keeter argue that information is a necessary prerequisite for rational political decision-making. "For the vote to serve as a reasonable first approximation of the public will, as a useful mechanism for selecting public leaders, and as a credible check on the behavior of those leaders, voters need to have at least some minimal information regarding all three" (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 50)

Delli Carpini and Keeter appear to be concerned with a limited form of democracy where the public simply "selects leaders" and "checks" their performance. Habermas's model of deliberative democracy, however, requires that citizens deliberate about particular policies that affect their interests, or at least about how elected state personnel should determine policies that will affect particular interests. Thus, to assess the feasibility of Habermas's ideal, it is important to determine whether the public can become knowledgeable about particular policy issues in addition to the institutions and processes of government.

Delli Carpini and Keeter present some striking statistics that directly reveal the public's lack of knowledge of substantive issues: in 1964, only 61 percent of the survey sample knew that the United States was a mem-



ber of NATO, and only 41 percent knew that Russia was not; in 1965, only 60 percent knew that excise-tax legislation had passed that year; in 1987, only 58 percent could locate the Persian Gulf; in 1984, only 48 percent knew the unemployment rate; in 1980, only 45 percent knew a major cause of air pollution; in 1985, only 42 percent knew the inflation rate; in 1985, only 31 percent could define affirmative action; in 1979, only 30 percent could identify the two countries in the SALT treaty; in 1981, only 19 percent could define supply-side economics; in 1989, a mere 18 percent knew what proportion of the population lived below the poverty line; and in 1984, only 8 percent knew what proportion of the federal budget was spent on Social Security (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 80-81, 84). Similarly, using data from the 1980 National Election Survey, Neuman found that only 4 percent of the population could associate at least one specific "actionable policy position" with each candidate in the Reagan-Carter election (1986, 26).

Some observers may discount these discouraging statistics by instead pointing to Delli Carpini and Keeter's more optimistic findings: 99 percent of the population could identify the president in 1986, 96 percent knew that the U.S. is a member of the U.N. in 1985, 88 percent knew that the United States is a democracy in 1988, 86 percent knew the level of the minimum wage in 1984, and 78 percent knew that the Soviet Union was a communist country in 1948 (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 70-71, 74-75, 80-81, 83). While these statistics prove that the public is not absolutely ignorant of politics—or more precisely, ignorant of the most obvious and general political facts—the amount of knowledge revealed is still far below the minimal level that Habermas's model requires. For deliberations to produce valid policies, the participants must possess a familiarity with and understanding of the issues being discussed, so that they can make decisions that protect and advance their interests; being able to identify the

President of the United States does not tell you if a particular tax policy is good or bad for the economy. The conclusion that the public lacks necessary knowledge is borne out consistently by an examination of Delli Carpini and Keeter's and Page and Shapiro's exhaustive statistical tables.

### The Myth of Issue Publics

In response to such discouraging measures of the public's overall knowledge of politics, one may be tempted to find solace in Converse's theory of issue publics. According to this theory, people do not need to be informed about every aspect of politics as long as they are informed about the issues that affect them the most. Recent research by Neuman and Delli Carpini and Keeter, though, challenges the existence and desirability of such groups.

To test whether people who are affiliated with a particular demographic group pay more attention to or know more about an issue that has special significance for that group, Neuman investigates unemployed people's opinions about the government's unemployment and redistributive welfare policies, using measures of opinion stability and responsiveness as proxies for political knowledge. In both instances, he finds that, counterintuitively, "those who have not experienced unemployment are more likely to express opinions and are slightly more likely to have stable opinions" (Neuman 1986, 69). As he mentions, this finding may result from other factors that contribute to unemployment, such as education (*ibid.*). Similarly, when Neuman investigates the effect of age on opinions about Social Security, he again finds that the demographic factor in question, which the theory of issue publics predicts should influence opinions and knowledge, did not have any effect (*ibid.*, 70).

Still, some researchers have produced studies that appear to affirm the existence of issue publics. For instance, using data from a telephone survey of 143 peo-

ple in Suffolk County, New York, Shanto Iyengar (1990, 164) concludes that blacks know more about civil rights than whites and thus constitute an issue public; or that, in his words, they selectively focus on the "domain" that affects them. However, Ilya Somin undercuts the strength of this conclusion by pointing out that Iyengar tests only whether people can identify Thurgood Marshall, the NAACP, and the term "affirmative action" (ibid., 183; Somin 1998, 428). As Somin argues, "It is not at all clear that a voter whose knowledge is limited to elementary facts of this sort can cast an informed vote on complex issues."

While Somin concedes that being affiliated with a demographic group may cause someone to learn more about that group's history or culture, Iyengar's data do not indicate that it causes people to become more informed about particular issues. This failure to find demographically based issue publics is surprising, especially if one accepts the assumption that voters are at least partly motivated by self-interest, because a concern for self-interest should motivate people to become more informed about issues that disproportionately affect them. A plausible explanation for these data, one that remains consistent with the self-interest assumption and the political ignorance data, is that most people are simply unaware of the issues that disproportionately affect them.

Neuman also analyzed respondents' opinions over time on issues that they had identified when answering the open-ended question "which issues are of special concern to you?" This was the same method that Converse (1964, 246) used to develop his theory of issue publics. Although an initial analysis of the data, like Converse's, appears to endorse the existence of issue publics, Neuman discovers a flaw in this method. People who are likely to have opinions about an issue of special concern are also likely to have opinions on many unrelated issues (Neuman 1996, 72). After controlling for the total number of issues mentioned by each person

surveyed, Neuman does not find any evidence to endorse the existence of issue publics.

Delli Carpini and Keeter also thoroughly investigate the possibility of issue publics and come to the same conclusion as Neuman. Using the 1989 Survey of Political Knowledge, which was expressly designed to test for domain-specific knowledge, they find that even though traces of support for issue publics exist, most of the data support a "unidimensional" conception of political knowledge (1996, 142). They discover "that, for example, while knowledge about the United Nations is a good predictor of knowledge about other aspects of international relations, it is almost as good a predictor of knowledge about racial issues, economic issues, and, ultimately, of general knowledge about national politics itself" (ibid., 147).

Even though the bulk of the survey data refutes the issue-public theory, Neuman (1986, 73), one of its leading critics, argues that it is possible that current research methods are responsible for failing to detect their existence. One possibility, he contends, is that issue publics are so small that mass sample surveys cannot meaningfully analyze them.

But even if issue publics do exist, in order to qualify as engaging in a Habermasian political process, the public would need to possess a much larger range of knowledge than issue publics would allow, because only if everyone is informed enough about their interests that they can bring them into the discourse can the best argument—i.e., the best policy or candidate—be chosen.

Somin's general discussion of the issue-public theory adumbrates the point. First, he points out that because many political issues affect specific groups in obscure or indirect ways, the relevant issue publics may not become adequately informed (Somin 1998, 428). This echoes Converse's conclusion about "group-interest" voters: people tend to have strong and stable opinions about issues that affect specific groups in obvious ways, such as segregation, but not on complex issues that af-

fect groups in indirect ways. Somin advances as one example Peter Ferrara and John Goodman's research on Social Security. They find that since African Americans have a lower life expectancy than whites, while the Social Security payroll tax rate is the same for both groups, the program constitutes a "major hidden redistribution from black workers to white retirees" (ibid., 429). According to the issue-public theory, those who care most about or are most affected by this inequality should learn the most about it and lead the less informed in efforts to reform the system, but without access to the Ferrara/Goodman study, it is unlikely that the most affected people will recognize that they are, in effect, members of an issue public in the first place.

Somin (1998, 429) also points out that the general interest will not be advanced if separate, small groups control specific issues. "If each specific issue area is controlled by a subset of the electorate with a special interest, while these same subsets remain ignorant of generally applicable issues, the outcome may well be a process of mutually destructive rent-seeking that leaves each group worse off than it would have been had there been no issue publics in the first place." "Rent-seeking," a term that Somin borrows from economics, occurs when a group attempts to secure unique benefits for itself at others' expense. If small groups control the areas in which they have a special interest but do not care about or are unaware of how their actions affect others' interests, it is unlikely that policies will be produced that satisfy the principle of Universalization.

### Shortcuts to Irrationality

Most of the initial reaction to Converse contended that many voters do indeed think about political issues and come to firm conclusions about them. One of the most popular challenges to Converse, that of Samuel Popkin (1991), celebrates the insights of Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* (1957), which, at first,

appear to support Converse by offering a rational-choice theory of why people are so ignorant of politics. Downs's theory, in brief, is that it is rational for voters to be ignorant of politics because the cost of becoming informed (which he defines as spending one's limited resource of time on gaining information) outweighs the benefit of casting an informed vote, since each person's vote has such a statistically small effect on the outcome in any decent-sized electorate. Notably, this analysis does not rely on the assumption that voters are selfish. Even a member of the electorate who is completely altruistic would have more of a positive impact on another person's life by using his limited time to directly help her than by using it to become informed enough about political issues to know which way to vote.

While Downs may be correct that it is instrumentally irrational to become informed and, by extension, even to vote, Jeffrey Friedman (1998, 407) argues that this coherent reasoning cannot explain the public's ignorance of politics, because millions of people do indeed vote in elections with very large electorates. If people were to think in the instrumentally rational way that Downs's theory describes, and thus consciously choose to remain ignorant because they recognize the insignificance of their vote, they would "necessarily have [had] to recognize their ignorance, and this would [have] deprive[d] them of the 'attitudes' necessary to motivate them to vote." If people were aware that their vote would not make much of a difference and/or that it would not serve their ends (whether selfish or altruistic) to become politically well informed, then they probably would not vote. However, since so many people do indeed vote and consider their action meaningful, we can conclude that most people do not think about voting—or about acquiring political information—as Downs suggests that they do.

Instead, Friedman argues that many people must overestimate the importance of their vote if, as we observe is the case, they are motivated to vote (1998,

407). Cognitive psychologists have confirmed the human tendency to misinterpret probabilities (Tversky and Kahneman 1974). While such findings may partly explain why many people overestimate the practical impact of their vote, probably another significant source of people's exaggerated evaluation of the weight of their vote is the popular dogma that each vote counts and is important—a message that almost everyone learns early in school and one that is constantly reinforced over the course of their lives in mass democracies.

Still, Friedman (1998, 407) maintains that overestimating the importance of one's vote cannot, by itself, generate the motivation to vote: people must also believe that they are well informed. However, researchers such as Popkin and Lupia and McCubbins, who have been influenced by Downs's theory, argue that the public does possess an adequate amount of knowledge to motivate their votes. They agree that it is instrumentally irrational to invest large amounts of time in gathering political information, but they contend that by relying on information shortcuts or heuristics, most people can and do make instrumentally rational political decisions. Converse also realizes that many people use heuristics to make political decisions—he even identifies the prominent “nature of the times” and “group identification” heuristics—but he does not endorse the public's reliance on them, as Popkin and Lupia and McCubbins do.

In *The Reasoning Voter*, Popkin (1991, 21) seeks to “redeem the voter from some of the blame heaped upon him or her by contemporary criticism of the electoral process.” The criticism that Popkin attempts to rebut is that voters cannot make rational decisions due to their political ignorance. However, while he provides a description of how voters in America tend to make their decisions that is insightful enough to be useful to a political strategist (he is himself a Democratic Party con-

sultant), he fails to accomplish his goal of defending the quality of voter reasoning. Instead, he raises even more questions about the public's ability to make instrumentally rational decisions, questions that, in turn, further undermine Habermas's justification of deliberative democracy.

Popkin (1991, 16) acknowledges that Downs's theory, cognitive-psychology research, and data from Columbia University's first studies on presidential campaigns, which were performed during the 1940s, prove that voters do not retain much of the information that the media and politicians present to them, and that they only selectively use the information that they do possess. But he argues that to compensate for their lack of information, voters essentially use two types of shortcuts: they draw generalizations from cues or images, and they rely on the opinions of other people who appear to be better informed (*ibid.*, 16-17).

A large body of cognitive-psychology research supports Popkin's claim that almost everyone, regardless of education level, uses heuristics to make political and nonpolitical decisions alike (Popkin 1991, 70). Just as much research, though, demonstrates the dangers and biases that certain shortcuts can consciously and unconsciously cause, such as racial and gender stereotyping (Henderson-King & Nisbett 1996; Banaji & Greenwald 1994; Bem 1981). Thus the important question is: do the shortcuts that the majority of people use cause them to make instrumentally rational decisions? If Popkin's account of voter reasoning is accurate, the answer is that they do not.

Popkin (1991, 72) argues that one common decision-making technique is to connect a small amount of information with preconceived stereotypes or "scripts." Cognitive psychologists refer to this shortcut as deciding by "representativeness," because people who use this technique base their decisions on how well a person or policy represents or resembles their preconceived ideas about what a competent person or effective policy is



(*ibid.*, 74). For instance, we commonly develop opinions about somebody's competence or intelligence based on the college she attended. People infer a significant factual claim regarding the person's intelligence or competence from a single piece of information, because they use the script that intelligent, capable people attend certain colleges. Popkin argues that people assemble "causal narratives" by combining different scripts activated by small pieces of information, or what cognitive psychologists call "cues" (*ibid.*, 72).

Popkin discusses two instances—President Gerald Ford's failure to shuck a tamale, and the aborted attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran—in which voters apparently used this technique. In the first case, during his 1976 campaign, Ford attempted to gain support from Mexican-American voters in Texas by attending a rally in San Antonio where he was served a tamale (Popkin 1991, 1). Because this was his first time eating a tamale, he mistakenly took a bite into it without removing the corn husk, or "shucking" it. Popkin argues that voters who were concerned about how Ford's policies would affect Hispanics correctly inferred from this event that Ford would not be a good president (*ibid.*, 111). The second event that Popkin discusses is the 1980 military mission that failed to rescue 55 hostages in Iran, because defective helicopters crashed in the desert (*ibid.*, 4). Popkin argues that Jimmy Carter lost the 1980 election partly because voters blamed him for this foreign-policy failure and interpreted it as a symbol of America's broader weakness and Carter's incompetence (*ibid.*, 111).

The striking thing about Popkin's "scripts" is that they are indistinguishable from Lippmann's "stereotypes," which he used to suggest how badly informed voters are about matters with which they have no direct experience. A candidate's familiarity with an ethnic group's food is a poor substitute for information about that candidate's policies toward that group, and a single

mechanical failure is not an accurate measure of a president's competence or a country's military power.

Popkin (1991, 78) admits that people ignore relevant factual information when they rely on inferences and narratives, which are created by scripts and cues, to make decisions.

The information about votes, offices held, and policy positions taken in the past does not generate a full story and may not even be joined with the personal data. Narratives are more easily compiled and are retained longer than facts. Narratives, further, require more negative information before they change.

Popkin is describing a cognitive technique that encourages irrational decision making, in that people focus on personal data instead of relevant factual data, and in that their opinions, which are based on personal data, are difficult to change, especially with factual data. Popkin believes that the shortcut of retaining personal data and ignoring relevant political data is so prevalent that it should be called "Gresham's law of political information" (ibid., 79). Notably, Gresham's law holds that bad money drives out good.

Popkin admits that this "law" of information reception is potentially discouraging, because "personally uninspiring politicians with a career of solid accomplishments get bypassed in primaries for fresh new faces with lots of one-liners but no record of accomplishment" (ibid.). However, he thinks that people can still make rational political decisions because they also use another type of information shortcut, which he believes is a better "proxy for political records" (ibid.).

This second type of shortcut involves relying on a better-informed person's understanding and evaluation of important information (47). People use this shortcut when they follow the advice of opinion leaders, such as television experts, newspaper editorial boards, and political parties. According to Popkin, this shortcut works because voters have real opinions about general issues

and group interests but lack detailed information about how particular policies relate to those opinions. Thus they adopt the positions of those leaders or parties that share their basic views on general issues and group interests. Lupia and McCubbins (1998, 5) similarly celebrate this shortcut because they believe that it allows people to make the same "reasoned choices" that they would have made if they had complete knowledge of the consequences of their actions or policies.

This process of delegating decision-making authority to those with more information, according to Lupia and McCubbins, solves the "democratic dilemma," which is that "the people who may be called upon to make reasoned choices may not be capable of doing so" (*ibid.*, 1). If Popkin and Lupia and McCubbins are right to think that following the advice of experts allows people who do not possess sufficient amounts of information to make instrumentally rational decisions, then it is plausible that policies satisfying the principle of Universalization could be produced by society-wide deliberations.

However, while this heuristic works in theory, it is incompatible with reality because the necessary conditions for its success do not obtain. Popkin and Lupia and McCubbins seem to be on firm ground in suggesting that people do have real opinions about the general interests that they would like the government to advance, and that many people do in fact rely on this shortcut to make their political decisions—Converse offered both of these conclusions in 1964. Still, as both Somin and Friedman maintain, unless people invest large amounts of time and effort into researching different opinion leaders (defeating the whole purpose of blindly following the cues those leaders send out), it is much more difficult than Popkin (1991, 425) and Lupia and McCubbins (1998, 409) assume to choose which opinion leaders to follow.

To make the decision between competing opinion leaders more efficient and less time consuming, Popkin and Lupia and McCubbins suggest that people should follow leaders who have similar interests to theirs, which is a

form of the first type of heuristic: a significant claim about the quality of someone's opinions is inferred from a small cue, her visible interests. If political debates were only about choosing one group's interests over another group's, this heuristic might be effective—assuming that voters could identify the leaders who shared their interests, which, unfortunately, they probably lack the information to do (Somin 1998, 425). That problem aside, however, most political debates are about choosing the means to achieve widely supported ends. For instance, the education policy debate is about how to improve education, not about whether improving it is desirable—some people think that vouchers will work, and others believe that schools need more funding. The crime control debate is about how to reduce crime, not about whether reducing crime is desirable—some people think that prevention works, and others believe that deterrence works better. The economic-policy debate is about how to improve the economy, not whether a healthy economy is desirable—some people think that government intervention is necessary, and others believe that free markets are more effective. And even debates about the government's budget priorities generally involve agreed-upon ends—for instance, those who advocate redirecting money from the military budget to education do not argue that national security is an undesirable end, but instead make the empirical claim that the nation can be secured more efficiently and with less money. There are differences in opinion about the means to achieve these and other ends, but for the most part, almost everyone already agrees on the ends, so it is generally not possible to distinguish between opinion leaders by virtue of their possession of different interests.

Of course, some political debates are indeed contests over ends, such as the importance of individual rights and the proper role of the government, but these principles become important only at the elite level; Converse's research shows that the vast majority of the public is unaware of these ideologically driven debates.

Most people care mainly about how government affects their welfare and the welfare of others, and most political debates that achieve public salience are about how to improve the welfare of the country and achieve the common good. The interests that should be served are taken for granted; the question is usually about the best means to those ends, and wise choice of opinion leaders on such questions requires substantive knowledge of the accuracy of their views about the best means—but if voters had that kind of knowledge, they wouldn't need opinion leaders in the first place.

Beyond relying on opinion leaders, such as media talking heads, Popkin argues that it is rational for people to align themselves with a particular party and then unquestioningly follow that party's positions. But it is just as difficult for people to choose a party wisely as to choose an opinion leader. Almost every party attempts to appeal to a majority of voters by making similar claims about advancing the common good. This is not to say that real differences do not exist between political parties; rather, Converse's research suggests that most voters do not understand these differences. Popkin claims that "both parties and voters have found ideology valuable as a shortcut or cost-saving device" (51). However, he does not present any evidence to prove that voters understand different ideologies, and he completely ignores the overwhelming data that proves that most people are not even aware of ideology. While many people do affiliate themselves and vote with particular parties, Converse's research suggests that most people's party affiliations are unrelated to the positions that their parties support, of which the voters are blissfully unaware. Further, Somin (1998, 422) raises the objection that unless parties have strict enforcement mechanisms that force their members to vote a certain way, there will be differences even within parties over many issues. President Clinton's support of welfare reform is a recent example. This flexibility reduces the rationality of voting for a party's candidate, because that candi-

date may not share the party's opinions on certain important issues. But most importantly, Somin also points out that simply knowing what a party's stance on a particular issue is does not help one understand the likely consequences of that stance. Without knowing the consequences of a particular policy position, people cannot make an instrumentally rational decision about whether it advances their interests.

Still, Lupia and McCubbins (1998, 55-58) argue that certain institutional features can make rational choices more likely: namely, mechanisms that expose the incentives and interests of politicians or speakers and verify their statements and proposals. Because Lupia and McCubbins analyze this issue almost exclusively at a theoretical level by focussing on models, they ignore much of the political ignorance data and make many simplifying assumptions that do not correspond with reality. They assume that revealing the incentives and interests of elites will prevent corruption or the intentional deception of the public. But they overlook the possibility that speakers may sincerely advocate ineffective policies not because they are corrupt or liars, but because they themselves are ignorant of the policies' effects.

All defenses of heuristics rely on people's ability to verify the reliability of the heuristic—in this case, the statements and proposals of speakers. If an easily grasped measure of success and failure existed, such that all experts agreed that someone's proposals could be labeled "Right" and someone else's could be labeled "Wrong," then people would be more likely to make rational decisions, assuming of course that they paid attention to these labels. However, in reality, political issues, being complicated, are contested even among—indeed especially among—relatively knowledgeable elites.

Beyond the empirical objections to the claim that information shortcuts allow the public to make instrumentally rational decisions, perhaps the most impor-

tant reason why they fail to support Habermas's justification for deliberative democracy comes from Habermas himself. When the public reasons with shortcuts and relies on the opinions of elites, its decisions are merely reflexive and uncritical reactions, the type of behavior that Habermas seeks to overcome. He might claim that deliberation will make people less reflexive and uncritical, but unless people deliberate with experts who do not use heuristics and are able to communicate the necessary information, "deliberation" will merely be discussions of alternative oversimplifications of the world—a phenomenon with which any observer of real-world politics should be thoroughly familiar. People already have the opportunity to deliberate with experts, by reading news magazines and newspaper editorials and watching in-depth television reports, but the political ignorance data reveal that most people neither take advantage of these opportunities nor retain the information when they do. Deliberative democracy is justified by Habermas's discourse theory only if having the public participate in the deliberative political process is the best way to produce policies that satisfy the principle of Universalization. If the public does not have the necessary information to make instrumentally rational decisions that advance the common good, and if it, at best, follows the opinions of elites, then allowing it to participate does not make rational policies more likely. Thus, unless the public's political knowledge levels can be improved, Habermas cannot justify deliberative democracy.

### III. IS DEMOCRACY AN "OPEN" SOCIETY?

While the mass public's political ignorance has been well established and confirmed by many studies, its cause is still a matter of intense debate. Once the possibility of doing without information, for instance by using shortcuts, has been found wanting, the debate about causation becomes critical because its answer de-

termines whether or not political ignorance can be remedied, and thus whether Habermas's model of deliberative democracy can be revived. Some scholars maintain that ignorance is caused by adjustable institutional and social factors, while others believe that it is inevitable, because of immutable characteristics such as the limits of human intelligence or the complex nature of political information. In this final section, I will focus on Delli Carpini and Keeter's optimistic view and John Zaller's less sanguine findings.

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 179) argue that three factors—motivation, ability, and opportunity—determine how little people learn about politics. While motivation and ability might appear to depend on the individual, Delli Carpini and Keeter argue that these factors, in addition to the availability of and opportunity to obtain information, depend primarily on social and structural conditions, such as education, socioeconomic status, gender, and race (*ibid.*, 188-211). The most informed American voters are 71 percent male, 93 percent white; 31 percent high income, 53 percent middle income, and 16 percent low income (*ibid.*, 173-74). On the other hand, the least informed group is 31 percent male, 56 percent white, 33 percent black, 60 percent low income. The vastly different compositions of these two groups clearly demonstrate that social factors, such as race, gender and income, are tied in some way to political knowledge, just as they are tied to other important social resources (*ibid.*, 271).

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, 271) maintain that underlying the effects of income, race and gender, is education, which is "the strongest single predictor of political knowledge." They argue that education remedies all three sources of ignorance. It enhances cognitive ability, which makes people more likely to understand political information. It motivates people to obtain information by exposing them to, and cultivating an interest in, politics. And it directly explains politics and provides people with political and contextual informa-



tion (ibid., 190-93). Thus, one of their central recommendations is to make higher education more available to everyone by making it more affordable. "Greater government support for students could be the most significant single step toward greater civic literacy—and civic equality" (ibid., 278). They also argue that primary and secondary schools should focus more on politics and provide students with a more realistic view of the "conflictual nature of politics" (ibid., 279).

The goal of these solutions is to make the majority of the public resemble the cognitive elite in their awareness and understanding of politics. Converse's findings about the rigidity of elite belief systems and Zaller's more recent research, however, raise important questions about the desirability of this goal. While members of the cognitive elite possess more knowledge about political issues than the rest of the public, Converse finds that their beliefs are also more "constrained" by the ideologies they use to organize this knowledge—belief systems that "creative synthesizers" have presented as "natural" packages (1964, 248). Paradoxically, then, with political knowledge comes dogmatism; with political ignorance comes relative open-mindedness, as "ideological constraints in belief systems decline with decreasing political information."

Ideology constrains beliefs by limiting the ideologue's opinions about particular substantive issues to only those that his education has taught him fit with his general ideological orientation. A conservative ideologue will tend to be constrained to support a tax cut, while a liberal ideologue will be constrained to oppose it. By requiring opinions to remain consistent with fundamental principles or convictions, ideologies help people order their beliefs about many complex issues around simple, central themes. Thus, ideology functions like any other heuristic: it (over-) simplifies the otherwise complex world. While the simplification that a reliance on ideology produces helps members of the cognitive elite form opinions and organize information about many unrelated

issues, it also eliminates the need to independently analyze the merits of competing positions, because it provides a prepared set of beliefs. The success of Habermas's model of deliberative democracy, however, requires citizens to identify the best argument by performing the type of analysis that a reliance on ideology preempts.

This raises a critical question: Is the formation of a constraining ideological perspective the necessary result of increased political attentiveness? Zaller (1992, 45) suggests that it is. "If citizens are well informed, they react mechanically to political ideas on the basis of external cues about their partisan implications, and if they are too poorly informed to be aware of these cues, they tend to uncritically accept whatever ideas they encounter." A central insight of Zaller's research is that politically inattentive or unaware people tend to uncritically (albeit open-mindedly) accept most of the information that is presented to them, while people who possess more political knowledge are capable of perceiving the relationships between the information and their established opinions, and tend to close their minds to information and arguments that conflict with their predispositions (*ibid.*, 36; 44).

These findings suggest that even if ways were found to make the public become more politically informed, such as improving education—or radically restructuring society to give politics a more prominent place in people's daily lives, commanding more of their attention—Habermas's goal of deliberative democracy would still not be justified, because the mass public would remain incapable of making decisions that advanced the common good. While they would be relatively better informed, Zaller's and Converse's research imply that they would also be more ideological, and thus more resistant to opposing viewpoints, precluding the possibility of forming a universal consensus around the best argument.

Democratic models that derive political legitimacy from public deliberation tend to oversimplify the

process of assembling people's interests. The significant cognitive obstacle of figuring out how to connect one's interests with particular policies is rarely discussed. Perhaps this oversight occurs because supporters of these models are themselves ideologues who believe that most political debates have obvious and simple answers. Nonetheless, future research should examine the troubling relationship between ideology and political knowledge. If this relationship is inescapable, due either to the limits of human intelligence or to the complex nature of political information, then political theories that rely on the mass public to make collective decisions that advance the common good are probably hopeless as rationales for any democracy that can exist in the real world.

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