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POPULISM, ELITISM, AND THE POPULIST IDEOLOGY OF ELITES: THE RECEPTION OF THE WORK OF MURRAY EDELMAN

ABSTRACT: *Over the course of his career, Murray Edelman made one of the few sustained attempts by a theoretically inclined political scientist to explore the effects of the public's overwhelming ignorance of politics. In his early work, he focused on political elites' manipulation of an ignorant public through the deployment of symbolism. In his later work, however, he suggested that even elites are the puppets of their ideologies. His early work has been well received; his later work has gone largely unremarked. The reason may have to do with the very thing that Edelman was, in his later work, addressing: the (populist) ideological biases of his politically elite (academic) audience.*

If one seeks the legacy of Murray Edelman (1919–2001), it may be found in something he wrote in 1994 (250–51): "Political behavior and attitudes stem less from rational calculation than from the dubious influences on political calculation of threatening social and economic conditions, the subtle associations of language, the construction of leaders, issues, and enemies to serve political interests, the inevitable presence of multiple and contradictory realities, and the marked effects of symbols and images on political beliefs."

Such observations are, of course, commonplace in any sophisticated discussion of politics. But their disturbing implications are usu-

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ally themselves politicized: charges of political manipulation are hurled solely against one's political opponents, rather than being the basis of questions about inherent tendencies in all politics, even one's own. Edelman started out in the conventional vein, spotting the manipulative tendencies only of those who disagreed with his left-wing views. This work was well received in the academy, for methodological as well as political reasons. But while the tides of politics in the academy eventually ran even stronger in Edelman's direction than they had at the beginning of his career, methodological fashions shifted against him. Perhaps more importantly, as Edelman tried to explore the basis of political manipulation from a vantage-point of scholarly detachment, he asked fundamental questions that his peers seemed to find unworthy of attention—or unwelcome in the answers they invited.

When Edelman's *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* was published in 1964—the work's central thrust having been anticipated in his 1960 article in *The American Political Science Review*—behavioralism was the dominant paradigm in political science (see, e.g., Eulau 1963 and Somit and Tanenhaus 1967). Behavioralism was inspired by the idea that facts and values should be kept segregated, and that one way of doing so was to confine social-scientific hypotheses to observable actions. This encouraged attention to mass political behaviors such as voting and survey responses, which were easily observable and, moreover, quantifiable. Edelman was never a quantificationist, but he was a behavioralist, and he did think—hard—about the causes of mass political behavior.

The behavioralist approach had always had its critics (see Storing 1962 and Charlesworth 1967). But within a few years of the beginning of Edelman's career, David Easton (1969)—an early proponent of the approach—conceded in his presidential address to the American Political Science Association that the discipline was experiencing a "revolution," inspired by the New Left, that rejected the behavioralists' separation of facts and values. Today, among political scientists who cling to the fact/value distinction, the behavioral approach competes primarily with rational-choice theory for methodological dominance.

Edelman (2001, 1) could not sympathize with rational-choice theory, for he believed that human beings so frequently make mistakes that "rationality is probably the exception" rather than the rule. Indeed, a factor in his early acceptance among behavioralists was proba-

bly the fact that their own research, from the 1940s through at least the early 1960s, tended to highlight the ways in which modern mass publics were too ignorant and, arguably, irrational to live up to the requirements of normative democratic theory.

The Separation of Democratic Values and Political Facts

In the view of the mainstream of pre-1960s behavioralists, large portions of the citizenry were politically apathetic and ignorant (Berelson 1952), as well as being prone to authoritarianism (Lipset 1960) and hostile to civil liberties and minorities (McClosky 1964; McClosky, Hoffman, and O'Hara 1960; Prothro and Grigg 1960; Stouffer 1955). Behavioralists had often concluded that democracy's health and well-being depended more on elites than on mass publics. Some behavioralists, but not all (see, e.g., Key 1966), blamed the human condition itself for failing to live up to normative democratic theory's expectations. As Robert Dahl (1961, 279) put it (he would later change his mind: Dahl 1989 and 1998),

> one of the central facts of political life is that politics—local, state, national, international—lies for most people at the outer periphery of attention, interest, concern and activity. At the focus of most men's lives are primary activities involving food, sex, love, family, work, shelter, comfort, friendship, social esteem, and the like. Activities like these—not politics—are the primary concerns of most men and women. . . . It would clear the air of a good deal of cant if instead of assuming that politics is a normal and natural concern for human beings, one were to make the contrary assumption that whatever lip service citizens pay to conventional attitudes, politics is a remote, alien, and unrewarding activity.

Edelman's work echoes the behavioralists' emphasis on the public's incapacity to shape public policy. Edelman contended that the mass public was ignorant and passive. Worse, ordinary citizens incorrectly believed that their votes controlled elites and influenced public policy. David Ricci (1984) points out that in these respects, Edelman took essentially the same position as such behavioralists as Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963). When it came to locating responsibility for the problem and detailing the process, however, Edelman parted company with most behavioralists. Both in *The Symbolic Uses*

of Politics and elsewhere, Edelman argued that ordinary citizens' political dispositions and behaviors stem from the symbolic atmosphere created by elites. The behavioralists tended to be Progressives in their politics: they thought that the public could be educated and led in left-wing directions by a well-informed elite (Taylor 2004). But Edelman made his initial mark by integrating the behavioralist grasp of public ignorance with a less sanguine view of elites—less sanguine from the perspective of the left. Edelman clearly was not making a case for elite rule. His focus was on the deleterious effects of elites' *manipulation* of mass ignorance.

Edelman's trajectory would eventually make him a man without a party. Even the left-wing social movements with which he might have been expected to sympathize politically were led by elites, and his later work condemned political elites as victims of impersonal manipulation by the very symbols with which they manipulated their followers. As Edelman wrote at the beginning of his last book, "the Marxist concept of false consciousness, meaning an erroneous assumption about the sources of one's own thought, applies to the elite as much as to the masses" (2001, 1–2). Like those of the masses, the elites' dispositions and behaviors are a product of their "everyday lives" (2001, 4). Consequently, "the idea that innovation, change, benefits, and mistakes in policy formation stem from the work of conspicuous leaders makes historical accounts entertaining and dramatic but is also a major source of confusion and misrepresentation" (2001, 67).

One of the key components of Edelman's notion of symbolic politics was his focus on the role that language plays in political life. As he wrote in 1994 (239), "language . . . is the fundamental form of political action, giving meaning to other actions." In this sense, Edelman was indebted to George Orwell (1954; 1961, 246–56), a debt he acknowledged in several places (Edelman 1971, 73; Edelman 1985, 125 and 175; Edelman 1988, 71 and 111). Orwell (1954, 177) had argued that "political language . . . is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind." Like Orwell, Edelman could not be satisfied with platitudes about either noble masses or well-meaning elites, for his linguistic orientation located the problem with politics outside of anyone's control, in the very language they used.

Edelman's Vanishing Act among Political Scientists

Assessing an author's disciplinary impact is always a tricky affair, and any judgment should be regarded as incomplete. But it is indicative of what I take to be the state of things that references to Edelman's work are seldom found in the first eight volumes of *The Annual Review of Political Science,* edited by Nelson W. Polsby. Likewise, in two of the three collections of essays that the American Political Science Association has authorized since 1980, seeking to summarize and assess "the state of the discipline" (Finifter, ed., 1983; Finifter, ed., 1993; Katznelson and Milner, eds., 2002), one looks in vain for any citation of Edelman's corpus. It is true that Doris Graber's chapter on "Political Communication," in the 1993 volume, cites Edelman four times, and includes his 1964, 1971, and 1988 books in her list of references (1993). Graber, however, is not only a specialist in public opinion, but one who relies on open-ended, "qualitative" interviews. Her disciplinary and methodological position is therefore most atypical—but very much like Edelman's non-quantitative behavioralism.

It is only when one narrows one's scope to surveys of scholarship in the subfields of political communication, communication science, and political psychology that Edelman's work assumes greater importance. In the *Handbook of Political Communication*, Graber 1981 cites Edelman five times, Cobb and Elder 1981 refers to him three times, Simons and Mechling 1981 cites him twice, and Fichten 1981 mentions him once. Pettegrew and Logan 1987 also cites Edelman in the *Handbook of Communication Science*. Finally, Billig 2003, a chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, cites Edelman once.

When *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* appeared, the recognition was much broader. James C. Davies (1965, 695)—the author in 1963 of a major analysis of grassroots political behavior—proclaimed Edelman's book to be "one of those lucid, tightly reasoned books that are an intellectual pleasure to read, because its argument—and its virtues and defects—are so pellucidly visible." Although Davies felt that Edelman had veered close to reductionism—an unusual reductionism that boiled human action down to the actors' reliance on symbols—he decided that Edelman avoided the trap. Hence, his book was "very worthy of our attention" (ibid., 696). Richard Dawson (1965, 194)—the co-author of a major study of political socialization (Dawson and Prewitt 1969)—felt that "both the tone and the substance of the

book fit in with the current preoccupation of students of politics with questions about the functions and meaning of politics." Dawson (1965, 196) concluded that "Edelman presents a good argument that research on the symbolic aspects of politics is a subject well worth pursuing."

In these reviews, we perhaps see a natural sympathy toward Edelman's perspective stimulated by many decades of behavioralist realism about the true capacities of democratic politics. Indeed, George E. G. Catlin (1966, 162)—whom John Gunnell (2005) has recently hailed as a major precursor to the behavioral movement in political science—was so unimpressed by any novelty in Edelman's basic approach that he remained "unconvinced that Edelman's journey is really necessary." His was one of the very few negative reviews of *The Symbolic Uses of Politics.* (Catlin [1966, 163] was put off by Edelman's emphasis of "the Jungian term 'symbol.'")

Only seven years later, however, Edelman published the first of a series of books that were not so warmly received. The obligatory *American Political Science Review* notice of Edelman's *Politics as Symbolic Action* (Ross 1974) was lukewarm, at best. And under the growing influence of the fervently pro-democracy, pro-"social movement" New Left, Edelman's emphasis on public ignorance appears to have been unwelcome. Thus, William E. Connelly (1979, 847) was sharply critical of Edelman's 1977 volume, *Political Language*. Although allowing that it was an absorbing book, Connelly maintained that it was "seriously flawed." Connelly was concerned, for one thing, about Edelman's increasingly pessimistic tone. "By exposing all vocabularies and endorsing none, Edelman implicitly endorses the cynical view that all uses of language are thoroughly manipulative. But he cannot accept that thesis thoroughly, or else it would undermine the credibility of his own thesis."

By the same token, William C. Mitchell (1979, 264), reviewing Edelman's 1988 effort, *Constructing the Political Spectacle*, depicted Edelman as "presenting a devastating portrait of modern-day democratic politics—one that verges, at times, on the cynical—but a cynicism, not of Frank Kent nor H. L. Mencken," but rather of the subdued but still hopeful left. While "the lofty disengagement of [Walter] Lippmann," the Progressive who so completely lacked hope for democracy, "is nowhere to be found," Mitchell noted that like Lippmann, "Edelman offers mostly a counsel of despair." Mitchell, however, offers a highly unusual diagnosis of the problem: namely, that

Edelman "does not consider the possibilities of simply reducing the role of politics in everyday life" (ibid., 265). This is a rare note for any political scientist to sound, in any context, let alone that of the largely uncritical embrace of participatory and, later, deliberative democracy that has characterized political science since the 1960s.

Mitchell's solution to the problem of public ignorance aside, his assessment of the later Edelman as cynic, like Connelly's, has much to recommend it.

Edelman's Growing Pessimism

The recurring theme in Edelman's early work is that elites use symbols to manipulate and pacify mass publics. One finds similarities to the early work of Seymour Martin Lipset, who, in *Political Man* (1960, 253–58), wrote about the greater tendency among members of the American working class—when compared to their European counterparts—to subscribe to the so-called Horatio Alger myth. Their stubborn belief in the possibility of upward social mobility contributes to American workers' greater tendency to support parties committed to moderate reform, in contrast to European labor's backing for Socialist or Communist parties. Lipset (ibid., 254) pointed out that "divergent value systems also play a role here, since the American and European upper classes differ sharply in their conceptions of egalitarianism." In other words, values held and myths propagated by the American upper classes mold the mindset, and influence the voting behavior, of the working class. This thesis is not much different from Edelman's early argument.

Edelman's tone changes in his later work. He begins *The Politics of Misinformation* (2001, 1) by saying that "this book presents a view of the events and the people we encounter in everyday life that is more pessimistic, disturbing, even frightening than the conventional view." He adds that the view presented in *The Politics of Misinformation* will be "more realistic and more explanatory of the dilemmas we constantly encounter than the conventional outlook." Here, Edelman (2001, 1–2) makes it clear that elites as well as the mass public fall victim to their language, such that the notion of "false consciousness" applies every bit as well to elites as to the masses that elites seek to pacify.

One might be tempted to explain Edelman's increasing pessimism

as the natural reaction of a man of the 1960s left to developments in American politics, such as the election and re-election of Ronald Reagan and the more recent outcome of the 2000 presidential contest. But if one compares Edelman's later works, especially *The Politics of Misinformation*, with the circumstance-induced pessimism of someone like the late Wilson Carey McWilliams, another political scientist unabashedly on the left, it seems that this explanation may be inadequate. McWilliams (1995 and 2000) allowed that the outcome of many U.S. elections over the last quarter of the twentieth century had left him disappointed. Yet despite his disappointment, McWilliams was never—in print, at least—dejected. A sturdy optimism runs through his writings that cannot be found in the later Edelman. It is one thing for someone on the left to lose faith in the American electorate. It is another thing to lose faith in democracy itself.

The latter is what seems to have happened to Edelman, and this may account for the rapid diminution in the attention paid to him by political scientists—even the post-1960s behavioralists who still dominate the study of public opinion, voting behavior, and political communication. As for rational-choice theory, which accounts for public ignorance as a rational response to the small chance that any voter's opinion will make a difference in a large electorate, Edelman (1997, 102) wrote that it enables academics and policy makers to avoid confronting the irrationality of twentieth-century politics, which produced "needless wars, the Holocaust and other genocidal operations, and domestic policies that increase poverty, crime, homelessness, and drug abuse, and ruin educational institutions and other aspects of the infrastructure." "For those with a stake in the status quo," Edelman writes, "a comforting response to these disturbing trends is to persuade themselves and a wider public that policy choice is a rational choice and can or should be evaluated by criteria based on that premise" (ibid.). (In the same article, Edelman had equally critical things to say about the defenses of democracy to be found in systems theory and pluralist theory.)

Edelman's "Disappearance" in Historical Context

Evidence about the politics of scholars in general, and political scientists in particular, has—ironically—been spotty, at best. To say that the

nature and origins of their own politics does not interest political scientists (or at least that such an interest does not animate their research) would be a gross understatement.

There have, nonetheless, been a handful of studies of academics in general, and social scientists in particular, and these have found the academics to be disproportionately to the left ideologically and Democratic in partisanship (Eitzen and Maranell 1968; Ladd and Lipset 1971 and 1975; Lipset and Ladd 1972; Spaulding and Turner 1968; Turner, McClintock, and Spaulding 1963). Ladd and Lipset (1975, 26) found that in the late 1960s and early 1970s, American university professors were a bit more than twice as likely as the public to describe their ideology as "Left" or "Liberal" (46 percent versus 20 percent), somewhat less likely to say that their political orientation was "middle-of-the-road" (27 percent versus 38 percent), and considerably less likely to label their political ideology as "moderately" or "strongly" conservative (28 percent versus 42 percent). Moreover, Ladd and Lipset found that social scientists were even more likely than professors in general to say they were on the left. Self-described leftists outnumbered right-wing social scientists by 44 percent (Ladd and Lipset 1975, 60).

Most of these studies are not only few in number, but old in provenance. One might wonder if findings from the 1960s and 1970s have any bearing on the present. But what is striking is that more recent work, however methodologically questionable some of it is when compared to the earlier research, shows uniformedly a marked shift even farther to the left over the last 30–40 years (*The American Enterprise* 2002; Bosworth 2002; Kimball 1998; Lee 2002; Rothman, Nevitte, and Lichter 2005; Rothman, Lichter, and Nevitte 2005; Schweikart 2002; Zinsmeister 2005). Moreover, faculty in elite institutions of higher learning tend to be even farther to the left ideologically, and even more likely to vote Democratic or fringe-left, than teachers at less research-oriented institutions. Assuming that all of this is the result of the New Left's long march through the academic institutions, one can infer that the scholars who might have been expected to pick up the threads of Edelman's research in their own work may have been disproportionately committed to the very thing—democracy—that his later work, especially, calls into question.

Critics of the more recent studies of academic "bias" (e.g., Lazare 2004) often suggest either that they are suspect because they are undertaken by conservatives or appear in right-leaning venues, or that

Table 1. American professors' political orientations, 1989/90–2004/05.

	Far Left	Liberal	Moderate	Conservative	Far Right
1989–1990					
2-Year Institutions	2.2%	27.1%	45.1%	25.1%	0.5%
4-Year Institutions	5.7%	39.5%	33.7%	15.7%	0.4%
1992–1993					
2-Year Institutions	1.7%	31.2%	39.4%	25.1%	0.6%
4-Year Institutions	4.9%	41.3%	33.7%	19.6%	0.5%
1995–1996					
2-Year Institutions	2.2%	27.6%	43.6%	26.1%	0.6%
4-Year Institutions	5.6%	40.6%	36.0%	17.4%	0.4%
1998–1999					
2-Year Institutions	3.4%	32.6%	43.4%	20.2%	0.4%
4-Year Institutions	5.8%	41.7%	35.3%	16.8%	0.3%
2001–2002					
2-Year Institutions	3.3%	33.0%	40.9%	22.6%	0.3%
4-Year Institutions	5.9%	45.1%	32.3%	16.3%	0.3%
2004–2005					
2-Year Institutions	5.3%	33.3%	35.1%	25.2%	1.1%
4-Year Institutions	8.7%	46.5%	27.4%	16.9%	0.5%

Sources: Surveys of American college and university faculty conducted by UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

they are based on slender evidence. But there are data that escape such criticisms, especially those published in 2005 by Daniel Klein, Stanley Rothman, and their associates. Moreover, at roughly two-year intervals since 1989–1990, UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute (hereafter HERI) has conducted surveys of American college and university faculty (see Astin, Korn, and Dey 1991; Dey, Ramirez, Korn, and Astin 1993; Lindholm, Astin, Sax, and Korn 2002; Lindholm, Szelényi, Hurtado, and Korn 2005; Sax, Astin, Arredondo, and Korn 1996; Sax, Astin, Korn, and Gilmartin 1999) that bear out the Klein and Lipset findings. On each occasion, the HERI database has

been 30,000–40,000 academics. Among the many items in this survey is a self-identification test, in which a respondent can label herself as "Far Left," "Liberal," "Moderate," "Conservative," or "Far Right." Unlike measures of partisanship and voting behavior, these responses make it possible to trace faculty *ideological* orientations between 1989–1990 and 2004–2005. Table 1 displays the information.

There are several important messages in the HERI data. First, even within the brief period of 1989–90 to 2004–2005, American faculty drifted noticeably leftward. If we look at all faculty, slightly over 40 percent classified themselves as either "Far Leftists" or "Liberals" in 1989–1990, while just over 50 percent did so in 2004–2005. Self-described Moderates made up two-fifths of all faculty in 1989–1990, but only 29 percent in 2004–2005. The ranks of "Conservatives" and those on the "Far Right," combined, didn't even break 20 percent of all professors, either in 1989–1990 or 2004–2005. It bears noting that "all professors" includes teachers in agriculture, business, and medical schools and chemistry, biology, mathematics, and physics departments—not the social scientists (and, these days, the humanists) who, as Ladd and Lipset showed, were far more likely to be on the left, and who are the only ones who might be expected to pick up on Edelman's work in their own research and teaching. (The HERI data cannot be disaggregated by discipline, but Klein and Charlotta Stern 2005 report that Democrats outnumber Republicans in political-science departments by a ratio of 6.7 to 1. Partisanship and ideology are not the same, but they usually overlap, especially among the highly educated.)

Edelman's later work challenged the commitment to democracy—especially the more-democracy-is-always-better, post-1960s view—that, one may confidently assert, increasingly characterized the potential audience for his work. Moreover, the *reason* for his shift from mere pessimism about the possibility of rescuing democracy from elite manipulation, toward cynicism about democracy itself, poses a challenge to the adherent of *any* ideology. Edelman became convinced that even the relatively well-informed ideologue is the victim of language and symbols—culture—that have a life of their own. If they have a life of their own, then their hegemony cannot be blamed on those who are relatively adept at manipulating them, and the analyst of their manipulation cannot exclude the possibility that he himself is being "manipulated" by them. The self-evident truth of the post-New Left outlook is by now widely assumed in the academic

world; Edelman, if closely heeded, challenges the self-evidence of any truth.

Edelman began his career by writing about the symbolic *uses* of politics. He ended it by writing about the ways that political symbols are in control, even of those who attempt to use them. There is no better demagogue than one who sincerely believes in the symbols he manipulates; this is a lesson one might well draw from the work of the paragon of behavioralist public-opinion research, Philip E. Converse (1964). However, it is a lesson that flies in the face of both populist and elitist versions of democracy, and poses challenges both political and methodological that have not, as yet, been met.

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