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PUBLIC COMPETENCE IN NORMATIVE AND POSITIVE THEORY: NEGLECTED IMPLICATIONS OF "THE NATURE OF BELIEF SYSTEMS IN MASS PUBLICS"

ABSTRACT: *"The Nature of Belief Systems" sets forth a Hobson's choice between rule by the politically ignorant masses and rule by the ideologically constrained—which is to say, the doctrinaire—elites. On the one hand, lacking comprehensive cognitive structures, such as ideological "belief systems," with which to understand politics, most people learn distressingly little about it. On the other hand, a spiral of conviction seems to make it difficult for the highly informed few to see any aspects of politics but those that confirm the cognitive structures that organize their political perceptions. This is a troubling situation for any consequentialist democratic political theory, according to which what is crucial is the electorate's (and subsidiary decision makers') ability to make informed policy judgments, not their possession of willful but uninformed political "attitudes." Any political theorist who does not take democracy to be an end in itself (regardless of its consequences) should be concerned about Converse's findings.*

It is my pleasure to republish in this volume Philip E. Converse's landmark 1964 paper, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass

Publics," along with reflections from eminent political scientists, including Converse himself.

With this honor goes the privilege of being able to foist onto the reader my own observations about the attention, and the neglect, that various aspects of Converse's paper have received. This is not an opportunity I would normally have, since I am not a survey researcher or a political psychologist, and it is primarily those fields that Converse's work has affected. I am a political theorist, and among such scholars' ranks, democratic ideals are pretty much taken for granted. In part, this is because political theorists are almost entirely innocent of the research on the ignorant public that Converse inspired. Were they less ignorant of the literature on public ignorance, it would not be so easy for them to be complacent about democratic ideals.

The reflections of our symposium contributors are, fortunately, accessible to nonspecialists, whether theorists, lay students of politics, or scholars in other disciplines. Thus, rather than commenting on their contributions, I see my task as that of inducing outsiders to the post-Converse literature to read the informative articles published here—by explicating the one that gave rise to them all, "The Nature of Belief Systems" itself. Readers seeking an historical overview of the issues at stake should turn to Stephen Earl Bennett's article below. A thematic treatment of the main lines of scholarly debate "after Converse" is provided by Donald Kinder's paper. James Fishkin, Doris Graber, Russell Hardin, Arthur Lupia, and Samuel Popkin argue out some of the normative and theoretical implications that have been derived from Converse. And Scott Althaus, Samuel DeCanio, Ilya Somin, and Gregory Wawro focus, albeit not exclusively, on how "Conversean" ideas can be further applied in political and historical research.

My own approach will be both textual and speculative. I will attempt a close enough reading of "The Nature of Belief Systems" that those who are unfamiliar with this seminal document might come to see its importance. But my aim will not centrally be to determine "what Converse really meant"; indeed, I know for a fact that he disagrees with aspects of my interpretation. Instead, I will develop what I see as some of the most important ramifications of Converse's paper, which have gone undernoticed—perhaps even by him—and I will state them as provocatively as I can.

I. IMPLICATIONS OF "THE NATURE OF BELIEF SYSTEMS" FOR NORMATIVE THEORY

Weber ([1904] 1949) famously taught that, if it is not to turn into the production of knowledge for its own sake, empirical scholarship is properly guided by the scholars' normative "interests." Although "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics" does not reach normative conclusions, neither it nor the scholarly literature to which it has led are exercises in the pointless production of knowledge that Weber feared. There are countless and justifiable discussions in this literature about how *discouraged* we should be by the research that Converse pioneered, and the discouragement in question regards nothing less than the possibility, and the legitimacy, of democratic rule.

If the picture painted in "The Nature of Belief Systems" is accurate, there may be no hope that popular government can exist; or that, to the extent that it does, it can produce desirable results.

Converse used interview data generated by the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center (SRC) to show what had long been suspected by anecdotal observers of public opinion, such as Walter Lippmann ([1922] 1949) and Joseph A. Schumpeter (1950): that the public is abysmally unschooled in almost everything connected to politics. This conclusion was already apparent in the portrait of *The American Voter* (1960) that Converse and his Michigan colleagues Angus Campbell, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes had painted four years before Converse's paper appeared (again drawing on SRC data). As Christopher Achen (1975, 1218) conceded in the introduction to his noteworthy, and much noted, critique of Converse:

> The sophisticated electorates postulated by some of the more enthusiastic democratic theorists do not exist, even in the best educated modern societies.

> The public opinion surveys reported by the University of Michigan Survey Research Center (SRC) have powerfully supported the bleakest views of voter sophistication. . . . The predominant impression these studies yield is that the average citizen has little understanding of political matters. Voters are said to be little influenced by "ideology," to cast their votes with far more regard to their party identification than to the issues in a campaign, and often to be ignorant of even the names of the candidates for Congress in their district. Needless to say,

the impact of these conclusions on democratic theory is enormously destructive.

Subsequent research,[1] inspired by the work of the Michigan school, has amply borne out its "bleak" findings. Whether the question is what the government does, what it is Constitutionally authorized to do, what new policies are being proposed, or what reasons are being offered for them, most people have no idea how to answer accurately (e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992, 10–11; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Hochschild 2001, 320; Bishop 2005).

Most of this scholarship establishes that the public lacks the most *elementary* political information. It is paradoxical, then, that nothing more dramatically brought public ignorance home to public-opinion scholars than Converse's paper, which focused on the public's ignorance of relatively *esoteric* knowledge: knowledge of political ideology.

Converse ([1964] 2006, 67n13) confined to an end note such indicators of the public's basic political ignorance as the fact that "at the height of the Berlin crisis, 63 percent of the American public did not know that the city was encircled by hostile troops," and that "70 percent is a good estimate of the proportion of the public that does not know which party controls Congress." Instead of exploring ignorance of such fundamental factual information, Converse investigated the public's ignorance of the liberal or conservative worldviews that surely undergirded the political perceptions of (most of) his readers, whose knowledge of politics was far more sophisticated than that of the average voter.

Political observers of the sort for whom Converse was writing tend to attribute electoral outcomes to the shifting fortunes of the liberal or conservative agenda of the moment. Converse showed that such analysis is wildly unrealistic: far from grasping what is at stake in the debates among liberals and conservatives that are ongoing at any given time, most members of the public do not even know what *liberalism* and *conservatism* mean.

Having been confronted with page after page of painstaking statistical analysis to that effect, no reader of "The Nature of Belief Systems" can come away unimpressed by the public's ignorance of ideology. On the basis of what, then, *does* the public make its political decisions? Converse ([1964] 2006, 38, 16) found that most people vote on the basis of their feelings about members of "visible social group-

ings"; or by unreflectively crediting or blaming incumbents for "the nature of the times" (e.g., a prosperous economy or the progress of a war); or by means of blind partisan loyalty, unenlightened by knowledge of one's own party's policy positions or of the overarching rationale for them.

Descriptively, the "take-away" point of "The Nature of Belief Systems" is that the public is far more ignorant than academic and journalistic observers of politics realize. The chief *prescriptive* implication is, I believe, that the will of the people is so woefully uninformed that one might wonder about the propriety of enacting that will into law.

The Neglected Problem of Ideologues

Related to the paradoxical way that Converse demonstrated the public's political ignorance is a curiosity of the subsequent literature, right down to the present day. So great was the impact of "The Nature of Belief Systems" that its topic, ignorance of ideology, has often been equated with political ignorance *tout court*. As a result, much of the research seems to take it for granted that if only average members of the public acted more like the ideological elites, the normative concerns stirred up by Converse would be stilled.

Thus, post-Converse public-opinion research has frequently sought to show that while the masses may be ignorant of ideology, their individual or aggregate behavior is similar to that of the ideologically sophisticated minority. At the micro level, post-Converse scholars have both explored and celebrated people's use of such proxies for ideological expertise as candidate endorsements by political parties or "public-interest" groups (e.g., Aldrich 1995; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). At the macro level, it has been pointed out that if the opinions of the ignorant many are randomly distributed on a given issue, the opinions of the highly informed few will decide the issue (Page and Shapiro 1992), through "the miracle of aggregation" (Converse 1990, 383).

As empirical research, this literature is not only unobjectionable; it is crucially important in filling out our understanding of what goes on, individually and collectively, among the members of a mass polity. But as a normative theorist, I wonder whether such findings shouldn't aggravate the very worries to which Converse's 1964 article give rise.

It has not been widely enough recognized that Converse demonstrated only that ideological elites are more informed than most members of the general public. This does not make them well informed in any absolute sense (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, 155); even the *more* informed aren't necessarily *better* informed. A statistical distribution of knowledge (of any subject) will always produce an "elite," of some size, that is more knowledgeable than average. What matters, then, is how well informed in an absolute sense—and how large—the knowledgeable "elite" is. Converse found that only about 2.5 percent of the public (as of 1956) was passably knowledgeable about the meaning of liberalism and conservatism, the "belief systems" that structured, and still structure, most political debate and public–policy making. That would be bad enough; but surely knowing what the dominant belief systems "mean" isn't sufficient to make well–informed political decisions.

Consider the most reviled pundit on the other side of the political spectrum from yourself. To liberal ears, a Rush Limbaugh or a Sean Hannity, while well informed about which policies are advocated by conservatives and liberals, will seem appallingly ignorant of the *arguments and evidence for* liberal positions. The same goes in reverse for a Frank Rich or a Paul Krugman, whose knowledge of the "basics" of liberalism and conservatism will seem, in the eyes of a conservative, to be matched by grave misunderstandings of the rationales for conservative policies. If Limbaugh, Rich, et al., turn out to exemplify the "cognitive elite," we are in serious trouble.

Converse, I believe, showed just that.

Converse's political elites are particularly well informed about what it means to be a conservative or a liberal, and their reasoning about politics is structured by this knowledge. But Converse's findings suggest, I think, that their relatively high levels of ideological knowledge are due to their being conservative or liberal *ideologues*: closed-minded partisans of one point of view. Should the leadership of public opinion by such people be a source of relief—or a cause for anxiety?

Converse ([1964] 2006, 3) defined ideology as attitudinal *constraint*. This is not necessarily a matter of ideological extremism or of undesirable emotional traits, as the usual use of the term *ideologue* might misleadingly suggest.[2] But Converse's unusual usage aside, the "belief systems" addressed by his paper *are* "ideologies" in the usual sense; and the net result of the influence exercised by these ideologies on their

believers, as wonderfully but disturbingly described in section II of the 1964 paper (pp. 5–11 below), is precisely the trait that is usually seen to best characterize the "ideologue": dogmatism.

Ideological *constraint* is a form of *determination*. Converse equated it with "the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes." There would be nothing worrisome about such determination if people's political attitudes were being constrained by logic or evidence. But Converse made it abundantly clear that that is not the type of constraint he had in mind.

"Whatever may be learned through the use of strict logic as a type of constraint," Converse ([1964] 2006, 6) wrote, "it seems obvious that few belief systems of any range at all depend for their constraint upon logic." Ideologies are only "*apparently* logical wholes," and the appearance is skin deep (ibid., 8, emph. added).

If it is not logic that constrains the ideologue, could it be empirical evidence? Converse answers this question more elliptically but, I think, just as decisively, in his brief remarks about the ideology *par excellence,* Marxism. Officially at least, the claims of Marxism are solely empirical. Marxists take Marx to have demonstrated certain empirical tendencies of capitalism, from which follow certain historical results. Converse asserts, however, that even if they were "made to resemble a structure of logical propositions," that is not what would give the claims of Marxism their hold on the political "attitudes" of Marxists (ibid., 7). It is not the force of the facts, any more than the force of logic, that makes the opinions of ideologues predictable.

For Converse ([1964] 2006, 7, emph. original), "what is important is that the elites familiar with the total shapes of these belief systems have *experienced* them as logically constrained clusters of ideas." But this experience does not stem from the ideologue's astute reasoning or her keen investigation of reality. Her views are, instead, determined by the political belief system she has been taught. This worldview, in turn, has been concocted by a "creative synthesizer" of that belief system.

Only a "minuscule proportion of any population" is capable of such creative syntheses (Converse [1964] 2006, 8). The tiny group of ideology synthesizers constitutes the stratum whose activities are usually studied under the rubric of "the history of ideas" (ibid., 66). The members of this small group of belief-system synthesizers—the likes of Marx, St. Simon, Spencer, and Ayn Rand—are not to be confused

with the multitudes—the conscious or unwitting students of the tenets of the synthesized belief systems—who show up in Converse's data as the ideologically sophisticated "elite." The adherents of belief systems, while a small fraction (e.g., 2.5 percent) of the mass public, nevertheless number in the millions, dwarfing the group of creative ideological synthesizers who generate the ideas merely repeated by their "sophisticated" followers.

Perhaps we should call the creative synthesizers "ideologists," to avoid conflating them with the legions of "ideologues" who are their pupils. The ideologues are the ones with predictably constrained political "attitudes." The ideologists are the ones who have established that these attitudes flow from "premises about the nature of social justice, social change, 'natural law,' and the like" (Converse [1964] 2006, 7). Ideologists lead. Ideologues follow. And the mass public, uninstructed in ideology, wanders.

In piecing together a new political worldview, ideologists are, for the purposes of Converse's model, unconstrained. In this respect, they look more like the ignorant masses than like the ideologues. The lack of constraint of the ideologists is a function of their creativity. The lack of constraint of the masses is a function of their cluelessness. Ideologists are, in the ideal type, free to produce the belief systems that suit them. Ideologues, by contrast, are constrained to accept the ideologies they have been taught.

By virtue of their attitudinal constraint, ideologues are unfree to concoct creative syntheses of their own.[3] "The multiple idea-elements of a belief system" are "diffused" from the ideologists to the ideologues "in 'packages,' which consumers come to see as 'natural' wholes, for they are presented in such terms ('If you believe this, then you will also believe that, for it follows in such-and-such ways)'" (Converse [1964] 2006, 8–9.) Ideologues have been taught which political attitudes "go together" in a package. Moreover, they have been taught "contextual knowledge" of *why* this or that package of attitudes supposedly follows from "a few crowning postures," such as "survival of the fittest in the spirit of social Darwinism—[which] serve as a sort of glue to bind together many more specific attitudes and beliefs" (ibid., 7). The glue is found in the arguments of the ideologists, but "there is a broad gulf between strict logic and the quasi-logic of cogent argument" (ibid.). The ideologists' quasi-logic makes a belief system stick, just as it makes the beliefs cling to each other in a "system," but the adherence of the beliefs to each other and to the

mind of the ideologue betoken their determination by culturally transmitted perceptions of reality and of what is reasonable—not by reality, or reason, itself.

The Hobson's Choice of Democracy

Converse damns those who fall for the quasi-logic of ideologies with faint praise that has often been mistaken, in the scholarly literature, for adulation. Yes, the ideologue may have predictable political attitudes, but should that be considered good?

Because she has been taught that attitudes x, y, and z go together as offshoots of the crowning postures of her ideology, and because she has been convinced of the legitimacy of the whole package by an ideologist's quasi-logic, the ideologue's "deliberation" will inevitably tend to reach conclusions x, y, and z. Her predictability is a product of the degree to which her mind has been closed. She may be better informed about ideology than most people, but she exceeds other citizens in being doctrinaire, as well as knowledgeable.

Indeed, in the very act of displaying the cognitive elite's attitudinal constraint, "The Nature of Belief Systems" suggests an inverse correlation between being well informed about ideology and being open minded about politics. There is, it seems, a tradeoff between ignorance and dogmatism: less of the first tends to produce more of the second.

Thus, Converse ([1964] 2006, 10, emph. added) expressed the "primary thesis" of his paper as follows:

> As one moves from elite sources of belief systems downwards on [a political] information scale . . . the *contextual* grasp of "standard" political belief systems fades out very rapidly, almost before one has passed beyond the 10 percent of the American population that in the 1950s had completed standard college training. Increasingly, simpler forms of information about "what goes with what" (or even information about the simple identity of objects) turns up missing. The net result, as one moves downward, is that constraint declines across the universe of idea-elements.

Keeping in mind that a "contextual" grasp of an ideology means an understanding of the (quasi-logical) *reasons* for it, there appears to be a joint correlation between (1) this knowledge, (2) knowledge of

which political attitudes are supposed to connect to each other, (3) more general political knowledge, and (4) attitudinal constraint.

Converse does not explicitly say which way the causal arrow runs, but I will argue that he suggests a plausible cognitivist theory, according to which knowledge of ideology ([1] and [2]) enables the assimilation of broader political knowledge ([3]), at the same time that it closes one's mind to attitudes that contradict the ideology that one has found persuasive ([4]). But even if causation runs from constraint by ideology to knowledge of it[4] (or from some outside source to all four variables), Converse's primary thesis is that there is a tendency for ideological knowledge and constraint to go together.

A tendency is not a necessity. The logical possibility of people becoming politically expert while avoiding the snares of ideology remains, and the frequency with which this happens in the real world is an open question. But given the correlation between knowledge and dogmatism that Converse seems to have found, it surely isn't true that if only the uninformed and ideologically unconstrained many mimicked the highly informed but ideological few, politics would be more rational, or policy more sane. It is by no means evident that we should prefer rule by the doctrinaire to rule by the ignorant. But that is the Hobson's choice to which "The Nature of Belief Systems" appears to consign us.

The Spiral of Conviction

If my argument is correct, "The Nature of Belief Systems" has sometimes been misread as a brief for ideology. But this misreading does not entirely lack for textual justification.

In Converse's telling, the "ideologues," when compared to the ideology-free masses, are able to integrate larger quantities of political information of *all* kinds ([3]), not just information about their ideologies ([1] and [2]). They are relatively well informed not just about why "attitudes" x, y, and z supposedly go together, but about other political matters, too.

> The use of such basic dimensions of judgment as the liberal-conservative continuum betokens a contextual grasp of politics that permits a wide range of more specific idea-elements to be *organized* into more tightly constrained wholes. We feel, furthermore, that there

> are many crucial consequences of such organization: With it, for example, new political events have more meaning, retention of political information from the past is far more adequate, and political behavior increasingly approximates that of sophisticated "rational" models, which assume relatively full information. (Converse [1964] 2006, 29–30, emph. added.)[5]

Perhaps ideology closes minds, but also provides pegs on which to hang the political facts of which non-ideologues tend to be so shockingly ignorant.

Converse does not try to explain why ideologues tend to be better informed about politics in general, not just about the particular tenets of their ideology. But his use of the term *organized* suggests that ideology may allow people to make sense of more political information.

This was the view defended by Walter Lippmann. The political world, Lippmann ([1922] 1949, 11) noted, is

> altogether too big, too complex, and too fleeting for direct acquaintance. We are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it.

Such a model is essential to seeing the world as something other than a blooming, buzzing confusion. But an organizing model of this type necessarily screens out more information than it screens in. That is its very function. It allows us to learn about the world—but primarily about what the model deems important about the world. Thus, it might seem to be a good thing for the ideologue to be highly informed, until we consider the almost-necessarily biased nature of the information he perceives and retains. With that in mind, one may doubt that the ideologue "approximates . . . full information."

Lippmann ([1922] 1949, 78) calls political models "stereotypes." He writes:

> When a system of stereotypes is well fixed, our attention is called to those facts which support it, and diverted from those which contradict. . . . We do not see what our eyes are not accustomed to take into account. Sometimes consciously, more often without knowing it, we are impressed by those facts which fit our philosophy.

By letting her focus on a few ideologically salient aspects of an infinite political world, a system of stereotypes—a belief system—allows the ideologue to absorb more information about politics than if politics seemed to her (as it does to less sophisticated observers) a formless chaos. If she is a convinced conservative, departures from the "crowning posture" of self-reliance will leap out from the political thicket as likely sources of social malfunction. With the assistance of the conservative ideologist, she can now digest much of the otherwise confusing data of politics. If, instead, she is a leftist, she will have been instructed by the ideologist to notice signs of capitalist perfidy. Each of these signs will register to her as significant, and they can be pieced together to form a coherent picture of otherwise-bewildering events.

In Lippmann's view, systems of "stereotypes"—ideologies—model the world by providing ideologues with *causal theories* about the way the world works. For Converse, too, the "premises" of ideologies include causal theories, as well as the more oft-noticed *values*. But, going farther than Converse might, it seems to me that causal theories are as essential as either values or (perceived) "facts" in the formation of political "attitudes." It may be part of the quasi-logic of ideologies to make it appear "obvious" that from certain values or facts flow political conclusions x, y, and z—as if people with enough neutral "information" will necessarily favor x, y, and z, as long as their hearts are in the right place (i.e., as long as they have the right values). But in real logic (as opposed to quasi-logic), only a causal theory can wed factual "information" with values to produce policy preferences: the policies one prefers are the *means* by which factual departures from one's ends (values) may be remedied. Such preferences entail theories, however tacit, about *how* the preferred policy will change the facts in a desirable way.

Let me take as an example the conjecture by Jennifer Hochschild (2001, 332)—one of the few normative theorists to express interest in public ignorance—that there might have arisen "no socialism in the United States" because Americans' perceptions of society-wide problems are counterbalanced by their satisfaction with their own lives.

Even if, as in the counterfactual Hochschild suggests, Americans were *unhappy* with their own lives, or cared only for *others'* well-being, a crucial logical step would be required for them to become socialists: the premise that socialism would, in fact, solve social problems. This premise entails many theories connecting facts in a causal chain, even if they seem to the socialist less like theories than like

common sense. If they are to lead to policy preferences, the facts cannot speak for themselves, even with an assist from values—unless one believes that a certain policy is morally justified, regardless of its actual *consequences.*

One might thus be a socialist for *non*-consequentialist reasons, i.e., because one thinks that socialist policies are ends in themselves (or because one thinks that being a socialist is an end in itself). And in such a case, one needs very little political information, and of a relatively neutral variety, to be an intelligent political participant: one needs only to know which politicians or proposals *are* socialist. In that manner, any normative concern about the low levels of information people have about *why* one might favor an ideology such as socialism could be averted.

But if, as in Hochschild's example, socialist policies are supposed to produce the good consequence of solving social problems, then one must have a theory that explains why the putative solutions will actually work. The ideologue may not be able to *articulate* the theory, as Converse showed is often the case. But that is all the better for the epistemic function of ideology. "The perfect stereotype . . . precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception; imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach our intelligence" (Lippmann [1922] 1949, 65).[6]

The reliance of (consequentialist) political ideologies on causal theories helps explain how their rigidity may make ideologues more informed than most people are about politics in general. "Public opinion deals with indirect, unseen, and puzzling facts, and there is nothing obvious about them" (Lippmann [1922] 1949, 17). One's causal theories, unexamined or not, will make visible whichever facts seem consistent with the theory. The more deeply rooted one's causal theories (deeply rooted in one's perceptions, not in the realities one is trying to perceive), the easier it will be to accumulate political information that fits those theories.

By the same token, one's causal theories will tend to validate themselves. The aspects of the world that fit an ideology are the facts that its implicit causal theories make easy to spot and causally intercorrelate. The glaringly "obvious" profusion of this confirmatory evidence testifies, in the mind of the ideologue, not to her selective perception and retention of information, but to the accuracy of the theory (however inarticulate) that makes the evidence for it so "visible" to begin with. The ideologue's growing stockpile of information thus functions

as ammunition with which to repel challenges to the causal theories that have allowed her to accumulate the information in the first place. For this reason, being *more* informed about politics than most people are can actually mean being *worse* informed—if one's causal theory is incorrect.

Information or Competence?

It might be useful briefly to compare the mind of the ideologue to that of the scientist, and not because the latter comes off any better.

It is old news to philosophers of science that there is a tradeoff between being highly informed and perceiving information selectively. In Thomas Kuhn's view, the evidence that contradicts a scientific theory is shunted aside as "anomalous" by those who are most familiar with the theory—its advocates. An even more pointed characterization of scientific practice is provided by Michael Polanyi, as quoted by the editor of the book in which "The Nature of Belief Systems" first appeared, David E. Apter (1964, 39–40):

> Why do people decide to accept science as valid? Can they not see the limitations of scientific demonstrations—in the pre-selected evidence, the preconceived theories, the always basically deficient documentation?

Polanyi might well have been describing the all-too-human practices of the political ideologue. But in science, the proclivity to see in "the facts" only confirmation of one's theories is overcome, to some degree, by the trial and error of controlled experiments that can falsify incorrect theories. The spiral of conviction regarding the truth of a given scientific theory eventually peters out, even if this requires the passing of the old "cohort" of scientific ideologues. Usually, no such corrective is available in politics. As Schumpeter (1950, 253) observed in his comparison of politics with the trial and error that takes place in *markets*,

> many [political] decisions of fateful importance are of a nature that makes it impossible for the public to experiment with them at its leisure and at moderate cost. Even if that is possible, however, judgment is as a rule not so easy to arrive at . . . because effects are less easy to interpret.

I raise the likelihood that there is no experimental corrective to the theoretical biases of the political ideologue to get at what I take to be the properly understood normative subtext of "The Nature of Belief Systems": whether democracy will be likely to converge, *not* on political decisions that would be made by ideologues who have more political "information" than the masses have absorbed, but instead on decisions rooted in political *truths.* Lacking an experimental check on people's proclivity to see what their theories have primed them to see, how will democracy overcome the ignorance/dogmatism tradeoff and, therefore, produce public policies that actually achieve worthy objectives?

Democratic competence of that sort does not necessarily require that anyone be so omniscient as to master every detail of politics and government (although there would be nothing wrong with doing so, if it were possible). But democratic competence must surely require that *somebody* know *some* aspects of politics and government beyond the neutral information of "who favors what," or even "why." Specifically, somebody has to know things that bear on which, out of a certain set of proposed policies, is best. This means that somebody has to know which of the theoretical rationales behind the proposed policies are consistent with reality—not just consistent with what various ideologies teach is true of reality.

In short, what is required for competence regarding policy consequences is not knowledge of political "information" *per se*, but knowledge of what might, for lack of a better term, be called "wisdom." Wisdom is information that, for the task at hand, is *accurate*, *relevant*, and not so *partial* as to be misleading. The criterion of relevance, in particular, requires that the decision makers' information correspond to sound causal theories about a complex world.

The public's lack of almost *all* political information raises strong doubts that the electorate possesses this type of wisdom (Bennett 2003). But prodigious quantities of information are no good, either, if that information is false, irrelevant, or otherwise misleading. A member of an ideological elite may have a more comprehensive causal theory (or series of causal assumptions) than does a typical voter, but the heaps of data these theories enable the ideologue to see (as "obvious facts") are downright dangerous: they can build impregnable fortresses around the ideology. Those who know a lot of facts will be wise only if their ideology tracks reality. A glance at the dueling ide-

ologues on cable television and in the blogosphere casts doubt on that likelihood.

Heuristics: Necessary, but Not Necessarily Good

The ultimate question is how human beings, *lacking* omniscience, can best be expected to produce desirable political outcomes. The scholars of non-ideological and non-partisan heuristics[7] rightly ask this question, and I cannot better the answer they provide: Cognitively imperfect political decision makers—human beings—need to take informational shortcuts, lest they never get to their destination (or even get close).

This is a message that is completely in accord with "The Nature of Belief Systems." The decision-making criteria used by political actors throughout Converse's paper are heuristics by any other name. Nature-of-the-times voters, for example, substitute (what they take to be accurate) information about, say, economic performance for full knowledge of incumbent personnel, policies, or philosophy. But that is not necessarily good news for democracy.

Cognitive shortcuts, like ideologies, entail causal theories. The nature-of-the-times voter's implicit theory is that the incumbent party is (somehow or other) responsible for prosperity or recession. The nature-of-the-times theory, compared to liberalism or conservatism, does not target nearly so much political information as salient, nor make so much of it legible. But that is not the problem with the nature-of-the-times theory. The problem is that it is so often *wrong* (Achen and Bartels 2004). In place of an impossible omniscience on their own part, nature-of-the-times voters have substituted an improbable omnipotence on the part of the incumbent party, and the government that it heads.

Thus, the normative problem posed by the use of heuristics is like that posed by the use of ideologies. Indeed, Converse ([1964] 2006, 18) suggests that ideologies *are* heuristics: they are "extremely efficient frames for the organization of many political observations." I attribute this efficiency, at least in part, to the causal-theory component of ideologies. Even the most complicated causal theory is a cognitive shortcut that abstracts from the full complexity of the world; this, arguably, is what allows it to "organize" otherwise chaotic information about the world. But one has no reason to think that the simplifying theo-

retical assumptions of any given heuristic—except, of course, a heuristic with which one agrees—are more accurate than the simplifications at work in a given ideology, or in any other nonscientific causal theory.

When the heuristics literature shows that people reason about politics, we must still ask if they reason *well* about *good* political information. And when some of the heuristics literature shows that the masses who lack political information follow the lead of ideological elites who possess mountains of it—but only the mountains visible from within the belief systems into which they have been indoctrinated—the literature has not necessarily demonstrated anything but that in mass democracies, the blinkered are leading the blind.

The Nonattitudes Non-Issue and Two Types of Democratic Theory

"The Nature of Belief Systems" sparked intense controversy, but the initial debate seems to have had the effect of confining awareness of Converse's paper to the small number of scholars who could follow the technical issues involved. These issues bore on whether Converse had shown that public opinion really amounted to randomly fluctuating "nonattitudes"; and if so, whether this was just a temporary effect of relatively somnolent 1950s politics.

From the standpoint of whether the public's political decisions are wise enough to produce desirable *consequences*, the stakes in these debates seem extraordinarily low. The question of whether the public's attitudes are stable is irrelevant, strictly speaking, to concerns about whether the public's attitudes are informed by accurate theories and good data.

In answering the latter question, attitude instability can, at most, serve to *illustrate* the severity of public ignorance. One may scratch one's head in amazement at the public's lack of consistent or "meaningful" attitudes. But one need not fear them. Even popular elections whose determinants are random might lead to good outcomes: once the public is reduced to choosing between two options, as is the case in American government, the voters have an even chance of making the "right" choice just by flipping a coin. (Indeed, if we accept Schumpeter's view, the random rotation of political personnel may be *more* likely to hit on good outcomes than would deliberate public re-

flection on government policy, since such reflection will be distorted by the lack of clearly interpretable experimental feedback; cf. Friedman 2005.) If there were a tendency toward a *wise* public will, then there would be a better than even chance of success, and we would have a *prima facie* consequentialist argument for democracy. So the question is whether there is such a tendency—not whether there is a tendency toward a *stable* public will.

The nonattitudes dispute is, however, very pressing from a normatively *non*-consequentialist perspective. Or so it may appear. As the debate was framed by Achen (1975, 1227), a leading participant in it, democratic theory would lose "its starting point" without stable public attitudes. For without stable public attitudes, there would no meaningful will of the people to be enacted.

The notion that democratic legitimacy flows not from the congruence of public opinion with *desirable* choices, but from implementing public policies that the public *desires,* is at bottom voluntarist[8]—not consequentialist. Democratic voluntarism has a small but distinguished body of theoretical defenders, including Michael Walzer and Robert Dahl. More importantly, though, voluntarism is a widespread viewpoint in democratic cultures, and it helps explain the post-Converse literature's initial preoccupation with the mere existence of stable, "meaningful" attitudes, rather than with well-informed and logical attitudes.

In this respect, the early literature echoed the transformation of the leading form of consequentialist thought, Utilitarianism, from a potentially paternalistic advocacy of whatever policies would have the effect of making people happy—an objective question—into a doctrine that, in its modern, economistic guise, conflates the satisfaction of subjective preferences with happiness. If whatever people prefer makes them happy, then classic Utilitarian paternalism is never defensible.

Classic Utilitarian doctrine was conceptually anticipated by Rousseau's distinction between the "general will"—the decision that is *actually* conducive to the good of all—and the "will of all": the decision people *think* is conducive to that end. The democratic voluntarist (e.g., Walzer 1981) refuses to make such a distinction. Like voluntarist (or "deontological") understandings of liberalism, which refuse to address questions of "the good" as potentially subversive of "the right" of the individual to decide what is good, the voluntarist view of democracy refuses to judge democracy by its (good or bad)

outcomes, deferring to the right of the people to enact whatever they will.

As the resemblance between democratic and liberal voluntarism may suggest, they are both grounded in the modern emphasis on freedom. Liberal voluntarism privileges freedom for the individual; democratic voluntarism, freedom for the collective[9] (or, more accurately, for the majority—as an extension of the equal freedom of each voter; e.g., Dahl 1989, chs. 6–7). Paternalism is the enemy of both forms of voluntarism, as paternalism would violate the *sovereign will* of either the liberal person or the democratic people (or both). Self-determination is what counts for the ideal-typical democratic voluntarist—not wisdom. Indeed, the very idea of political "wisdom," being potentially paternalistic, is dubious from a voluntarist standpoint. To the voluntarist, it would be *arrogant* (and dangerous) for political scientists, or political philosophers, to second-guess the people's decisions as unwise. Who, after all, are *we* to judge *them* (Walzer 1981, 386)?

It is not coincidental that when John Stuart Mill (1831 and 1836) began to wonder about the wisdom of the public's views about economic theory, his doubts led him in paternalistic and elitist directions with which he struggled for the rest of his life. The ground had been laid by the consequentialism of his father and Bentham, who defended democracy on the contingent grounds that self-interested voters would be knowledgeable enough about their own needs that they could be expected to choose policies that, in the aggregate, would serve the general happiness. This is an empirical proposition, and one that depends on what the younger Mill came to see as heroic assumptions about how easy it is to infer appropriate public policies from mere awareness of one's own interests.

Democratic voluntarism checkmates the authoritarian tendencies to which Mill's doubts about public wisdom led him, for voluntarism takes the contingent state of public wisdom out of the normative equation. The people's will must necessarily be done, let the heavens fall. But if, in place of the people's will, there are only nonattitudes, voluntarist democratic theory "loses its starting point."

That said, even "nonattitudes" are, in reality, merely evanescent "attitudes." It is not clear, given the nonjudgmental nature of voluntarism—its refusal to demand reasons, let alone wise reasons, for the sovereign's decision—why a voluntarist should denigrate a public will that changes from moment to moment (at either the aggregate or the

individual level). Why is an inconstant public will any worse than a stable public (or elite) will that is grounded in ignorance, misinformation, or dogma?

It may be helpful at this point to consider voluntarism in its original, theological form. In the fourteenth century, William of Ockham ([c.1330] 1962, 56–57) was driven by the exigencies of monotheism to posit a God whose will could not be constrained even by (arrogant human perceptions of) goodness or fact. Indeed, Ockham contended, it would violate God's sovereignty if His will had to be consistent over time. Thus, in Ockham's view, God could change his mind and undo the Decalogue or destroy the world for no reason at all. Ockham's voluntarism thus defended the legitimacy of (God's) "attitude instability."

Some centuries later, Leibniz ([1710] 1951, 28, sec. 8) replied, in effect, that theological voluntarism would put God in the position of Buridan's Ass. If whatever God wills becomes good by virtue of His willing it, He would have no basis for willing one thing rather than another. Leibniz did not deny that, if voluntarism were sound, God's attitude instability would be unobjectionable. Instead, he denied that voluntarism is coherent, for if God's will were sovereign, God would have no reason for willing even the most evanescent of "attitudes."

I will not go further here into this fascinating episode in intellectual history,[10] but two lessons can be drawn.

First, believers in voluntarist democracy need not worry about attitude instability, if they have the strength of their own convictions. They should follow Ockham's example and accept that the people's will, like God's, may be capricious—willful, one might say. *Vox populi, vox dei.* Why should a sovereign be "constrained" to be consistent over time? "Who are we" to demand such a thing from the autonomous people?

Second, a voluntarist must reject the political equivalent of Leibniz's rejoinder to Ockham. If the public, like Leibniz's God, must have *reasons* for what it wills, then the door opens to examining the reasonability of those reasons—and to "arrogantly" condemning reasons that are rooted in ignorance. For such arrogance could lead, in principle, to paternalistic violations of democratic sovereignty. Consequently, from a normative perspective, the voluntarist premises that seemed to justify the nonattitudes debate should close off research into less extreme cases of public ignorance, which bear on the wisdom, rather than the mere stability, of the public will.

After the nonattitudes debate ended, though, public-ignorance re-search continued. As Karol Edward Soltan (1999, 10) put it, "re-searchers have for the most part simply presumed that competence in the voting decision has relevance for democracy, and hence they did not hide their horror when empirical research revealed, as they thought, an abysmally low level of competence."

I can think of at least three normative judgments about this ongoing research.

First, if one is a democratic voluntarist, one may dismiss the re-search as normatively irrelevant—at best (e.g., Smiley 1999, 372).

Second, if one is a consequentialist, one may take the findings of such research to be potentially fatal to democratic legitimacy. As John Zaller (1992, 331) put it, a defender of democracy might contend that the people have a "right to settle any debate they feel moved to set-tle" in whatever manner they please: the voluntarist view. Or a de-fender of democracy might follow Mill, who, in *Considerations on Representative Government* (one of his attempts to square democratic legitimacy and public ignorance), argued that "political participation is a value in itself." This latter, "republican" view, rather than volun-tarism, is probably the default position of most democratic *normative* theorists.

But for Zaller—representing, I think, the mainstream view of em-pirical researchers—neither voluntarism nor republicanism suffices. If the public "regularly made decisions that [he] regarded as morally ab-horrent or technically stupid," he writes, he would not be a democ-rat. In the end, Zaller does not think the public tends toward such decisions. But that is a contingent question, and its answer is urgent if one is a consequentialist.

Between voluntarism and consequentialism lies a shaky middle ground that has been taken by most of the empirical researchers (but not all: e.g., Page and Shapiro 1992, and Achen and Bartels 2002). They have to be consequentialists of a sort, if they care about public ignorance as more than their vocation. But they restrict themselves, for the most part, to looking into whether the public is knowledge-able enough to favor the politicians who endorse the policies that it wants. That is, they ask about whether public ignorance has the con-sequence that unpopular policies are enacted. They bracket the ques-tion of whether public ignorance has the consequence that *popular* policies would, if enacted, achieve consequences that would—or should—be unpopular. By narrowing their focus in this way, the re-

searchers intend, I think, to sidestep both the controversiality and the elitism that are always dangers when second-guessing the public. All they ask is whether the public is knowledgeable enough to favor parties, personnel, or policies that reflect the public's wishes about means or about ends—not whether those means or ends are wise.

However, when researchers occupying the middle ground between voluntarism and consequentialism look beyond attitude stability, even if only to investigate whether the public is well-enough informed to be *competent* at choosing official executors of its attitudes, they open a potential gap between democratic reality and legitimacy. One's competence, after all, might include more than one's ability to choose a subordinate who will follow one's orders. Any research into democratic competence that probes the content, rather than the mere existence, of public attitudes (e.g., Bennett, Fishkin, Graber, Kinder, Lupia, Popkin, Somin, and Wawro in this symposium) goes beyond what democratic voluntarism would sanction.

Public-opinion researchers should notice the path they are on, and dare to keep going. If it is acceptable to question whether the public knows enough to choose personnel who will implement its preferred policies, why not also question, at the very least, whether the public knows enough to choose personnel who will implement policies that actually achieve its preferred objectives?

Politics is all too often reduced, in both elite and popular discourse, to the *intentions* of the public, of politicians, and of the policies they craft—as if wanting something is equivalent to knowing how to get it. The "how" dimension of politics, involving what Zaller calls technical issues—of anthropology, economics, foreign policy, history, psychology, and sociology—is usually downplayed in political discussion, and, too, in public-opinion research. Yet *unless* democracy is an end in itself, the results of the policies that are the end product of the democratic process are more important than the ability of the voters to persist in the "attitudes" that get the process under way.

It may be that public-opinion researchers, thoroughly familiar with bleak findings about the public's lack of the most basic political knowledge, find it pointless to ask technical questions to which the vast majority of the public could be expected to exhibit either nonattitudes or ridiculously uninformed attitudes. And such research would surely bear unwelcome news for any consequentialist defender of democracy—unless, hiding in the public's heuristics, are analytic

tools that are superior to those used by ideologues and other highly informed political "experts" (Tetlock 2005).

But I assume that the largest barrier to such research is captured by Zaller's reference to his own opinions about what constitutes a technically "stupid" public decision. Researchers probing the public's technical competence would have to confront the question of which causal theories, and which associated evidence, the public *should* know. The answer will inevitably invoke the researchers' own views about which causal theories are sound. Wouldn't this violate their commitment to value-neutral social science?

No: it would simply confer on their work a new level of normative "interest." Their empirical findings about the public's technical competence, or incompetence, would be just as objectively valid for those who disagreed with the causal theories about which the public was being tested as for those who agreed with them. A free-marketeer might investigate how much the public agreed with his theories of economics, and he might be distressed to find, as the young Mill did, that the answer is "not at all." Popkin notes, below (p. 246), that in 1948, 72 percent of the American public favored rent control; huge majorities always favor raising the minimum wage. The free-marketeer may turn suicidal; a leftist might be heartened; a fundamentalist Christian might not care. The findings remain the same.

Research of this sort would be the logical culmination of the tradition Converse started—as interpreted through consequentialist lenses. And it might have a welcome side effect in directing political scientists' attention to their own political biases and unquestioned causal theories. Political scientists, too, are members of the public—and as members of the politically "sophisticated" segment of it, we are more likely than most to be ideologues. Let's face that fact. Doing so might even help to change it.

II. IMPLICATIONS OF "THE NATURE OF BELIEF SYSTEMS" FOR POSITIVE THEORY

Solely for heuristic purposes—because, at the end of the day, authorial intention is irrelevant—I have been imputing to Converse consequentialist normative concerns that he may not have had, or may not have had unambiguously. His paper, like any paper, has objective implications that

may best be appreciated as if the text was written with those implications in mind, even if it wasn't.

But Converse was quite explicit about a different "interest," in the Weberian sense, of his research. This was his desire to dispel the "optical illusions" that beset academic and journalistic analyses of politics—the overinterpretation of electoral results, for example, as reflecting profound shifts in public *Weltanschauungen*.

Optical Illusions, Self-Fulfilling Prophecies, and Figurative Pyramids

One of the reasons to regret that public-opinion research is not more widely known is that the optical illusions may be stronger now than ever. The conventional political wisdom holds, 26 years after the fact, that we are in the (weakening) grip of a "conservative revolution" that was inaugurated by Ronald Reagan's "landslide" 1980 election. Leaving aside the fact that 51 percent of the popular vote is no landslide, a reader of Converse will be suspicious of claims about a "tidal wave" of right-wing (or any other-wing) public sentiment bringing about an "era" of some consistent ideological stripe. Wherever there *are* ideological "attitudes," we would expect them to be relatively stable, because of the constraining effect of the ideologies. At the elite level, then, it would be astonishing to find closed-minded ideologues converting to the other side overnight. And at the level of the mass public, it would be astonishing to find shifts in belief systems of which most people are, in the first place, entirely "innocent" (Converse 1964 [2006], 47).

Not surprisingly, then, the survey data betray little hint of the vaunted conservative revolution (see Page and Shapiro 1992; Schwab 1991, ch. 2). On the basis of these data, it is safe to say that most voters had no idea what specific policies Reagan advocated, and would have disapproved of them if they had. Not surprisingly, little on the conservative agenda—save ever-popular tax cutting—has actually been accomplished in the supposedly new era that began in 1980, except by bureaucrats insulated from public awareness (cf. DeCanio below).

Consider by way of illustration one moment at the beginning, and one near the end, of the alleged era of conservatism. Toward the close of the 1980 campaign, Reagan's impending victory (under almost inconceivably bad "nature-of-the-times" circumstances) nearly melted away when word got out that he might favor Social Security privati-

zation. Two and a half decades later, George W. Bush elicited a Democratic standing ovation of gleeful ridicule when, during his 2006 State of the Union address, he merely mentioned his failed effort to implement a similar policy. Even after years of warnings about the insolvency of Social Security, the public fervently backed the program, as research by Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro (1992, 118–21) suggested was also true halfway through the "conservative era."

Whatever the determinants of such macro-level attitude stability, we will only be distracted from exploring them if we assume a correspondence between people's self-reported "conservatism" or "liberalism" and a list of policy positions that a real ideologue would favor. Self-labelled mass shifts to the left or right probably reflect little but the widely broadcast news of such shifts: people in democracies like to be in the majority. When a Republican candidate whom the politically sophisticated know to be a radical conservative is elected for "nature-of-the-times" reasons, it is only natural for them to instead attribute this event to a phantom public awareness of what their new president stands for. After hearing it said again and again by these sophisticates that most people must have become "conservatives" if they voted for such a conservative president, it will be natural for many members of the public to start calling themselves "conservatives"—when asked for a self-description by a pollster—even if they have little idea what that means, and even if their policy "attitudes" remain unchanged.

The house-of-mirrors aspect of democracy probably goes deeper.

The day after the 1980 election, journalistic elites, in a classic case of projection, imputed their own familiarity with Reagan's views to the electorate, and concluded that the Reagan victory *must have* reflected a massive "shift to the right." The ethos of democracy is not confined to the institutions of government, so the opinion media then rushed to balance their own ranks with conservatives; a hundred (or at least a handful) of George F. Wills bloomed. (This went on only at the level of ideologically self-labeled pundits; at the reportorial level, no liberal leanings were acknowledged.) This shift among the talking heads may not only have reinforced the illusion of a shift to the right, among those who watch pubic-affairs programs; it may actually have *caused* a shift to the right among young viewers whose minds were not yet sufficiently closed to ignore the new, conservative messages they were hearing. An optical illusion, then, might have become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Converse's work inclines against the idea that any such rightward

shift filtered down, except superficially, to the mass level (but such an account may still explain the influx of conservative ideologues into the Republican party).

However, while in the short term, elite opinion may be received by the public in too fragmentary a form to determine election results, in the long run the only possible sources of people's political attitudes— no matter how uninformed, sporadic, and disorganized they are—are nature and culture. If the culture is not ideologically balanced (and no culture could be, without ceasing to be a culture), it would seem inevitable that long-run popular opinion would follow the ideological biases of those who shape the culture—except when the latter biases run counter to people's natural (genetically programmed) intuitions. Thus, Converse's emphasis on the stratification of opinion should, in principle, spark interest in evolutionary psychology as a "natural" source of intuitive heuristics and barriers to ideological receptivity. At the same time, it should stimulate research on the possible long-term, non-"hypodermic" effects of ideologically charged elite-generated messages— both at the level of talking heads and at the level of non-"political" popular culture, where a politically disengaged public would be most likely to pick up tacit political views.

In any event, while a "Conversean" picture of mass democracy reveals that elites and masses are poles apart from each other when it comes to conceptualization and constraint, this is no reason to think that they disagree with each other substantively. This is especially true when it comes to values and implicit causal theories, as opposed to opinions about day-to-day political issues of which the mass public is dimly aware at best. There may be a "continental shelf" (Converse [1964] 2006, 65) between the information levels characteristic of elite and mass opinion, but general elite and mass beliefs can be based on, or can be consistent with, the same intuitions. And within that compass, more particularized elite beliefs, over time and in simplified form, may trickle down to the people at large.

We should bear in mind that the elites discussed by Converse tend not only to ideology, but to political communication. Therefore, Converse ([1964] 2006, 66) unfashionably asserted that

> the broad contours of elite decisions over time can depend in a vital way upon what is loosely called "the history of ideas." These decisions in turn have effects upon the mass of more common citizens.

If the history of ideas can affect elites, it has to be through some educational process, formal or otherwise. And if the elites in question produce the output of the journalistic and entertainment institutions of a culture, then the ideas that have been taught to elites, once sufficiently dumbed down, can be expected to show up among anyone who consumes those products. Rather than automatically producing a sharp dichotomy between the *content* (rather than the ideological form) of the political attitudes of elites and masses, therefore, Converse's culturalist approach may yield lagged correspondences between the two.

In the final paragraph of his paper, Converse ([1964] 2006, 66) shifts metaphors from a continental shelf to "a jumbled cluster of pyramids," reaffirming the "trickle-down" theory of ideas that runs through the paper (e.g., ibid., 10). As Converse acknowledges, the trickle from apex to base will not be neat, let alone complete. Different people will be exposed to different rivulets of ideology, and from moment to moment, the ideas trickling down will differ, too, as the history of ideas takes its path. That said, both elites and masses are part of the same culture, so even as the culture changes, mass/elite continuities can be expected; that is the point, as I understand it, of depicting elite and popular opinion as part of the same pyramid(s).

Public Ignorance and State Autonomy

Converse's ideologues form a cultural elite, not necessarily a "power elite." The members of the public who are sophisticated about politics (relative to most people) aren't necessarily those who are in charge of the government. Realistically, however, the cultural elite, through its teaching and journalism, is likely to shape the ideas of the governing elite, who tend to be a highly educated subset of the cultural elite. The power of Converse's politically sophisticated stratum, then, lies not only in its attenuated trickle-down influence on mass culture, but in its subsumption of, and influence upon, those who directly shape public policy through their positions in the legislature, the judiciary, and the bureaucracy.

In a democracy, all "branches" of government are nominally subordinate to the people. The power of public opinion is supposed to check even the nomination and confirmation of judges and the appointment of top bureaucrats, since that is done by politicians beholden to the electorate. This nominal barrier to elite rule seems to have stymied the

movement to "bring the state back in" to political analysis. During the 1980s, the "state theory" movement was poised to take political science by storm, but while it produced penetrating analyses of pre-democratic states, both premodern (Skocpol 1979) and newly industrialized (e.g., Evans et al. 1985, chs. 3, 6, 8, 9, and 10), modern democracies seemed to stop "state theory" in its tracks.

How, after all, can state personnel act autonomously if, as in modern democracies, "society," or public opinion, controls the flow of revenue that pays for the standing armies that, in classic state theory, undergird "strong states"? The key role played by the military (and its supportive tax-collecting bureaucracy) in state theory—putting down popular protest—fades to insignificance in democracies, where public disaffection is translated into change nonviolently, through the ballot box—and where the ballot box controls the military. Is state autonomy possible, then, once the state is democratic?

Post-Converse public-opinion research can provide a positive answer to this question: The public can't control what it doesn't know about. But since that research is usually the province of specialists in American politics, this answer was not apparent to state theorists, who tended to be comparativists. (And the question did not seem to occur to public-opinion researchers, for the reverse reason.) Only recently (Somin 1998; De-Canio 2000a, 2000b, and 2005) has the cross-fertilization of public-opinion research and state theory begun, based on the simple premise that a public as ignorant as the one portrayed by Converse is unlikely to be aware of most of the things its government does.

Public ignorance may thus sever a democratic state from the *demos*. Government officials can let their own ideological agendas shape bureaucratic rule making, judicial decision making, and the crafting of legislation, without fear of electoral reprisal—even if their agendas are unpopular—to the extent that they think that the public is unlikely to find out about it. State autonomy in democracies, then, would have to do not with the efficiency of tax collection or the reliability of armies, but with a government so big that nobody can keep track of its activities.

This separation between people and policy has limits. The mass media can, by pounding away at a proposed or extant government policy, bring the public's limited attention to it. Hence Bush's defeat on Social Security. But these limits have limits: very few issues will receive such sustained media attention that they provoke public outrage and, thus, negative political consequences for unpopular policies. Too, if

media personnel agree with an unpopular state action, they probably won't work hard to raise public awareness of it. But within these very wide parameters, as DeCanio points out below, ignorance-abetted state autonomy could be the central organizing tool for rewriting the entire history of American politics—and the politics of any other democracy.

Rational vs. Radical Ignorance

Instead of state theory, it was rational-choice theory that swept political science at the end of the last century. Its influence is now ebbing somewhat, but as the most comprehensive theoretical agenda since Marxism, it still exerts intellectual authority. And it seems, at first glance, to offer a tidy explanation of Converse's findings. Why, after all, *should* members of a mass electorate bother to inform themselves about political issues? No individual citizen's vote has a realistic chance of changing the outcome of a mass election, so what rational voter would spend resources informing himself about how to vote wisely?

That, at least, is the conventional version of rational-*ignorance* theory: the theory of rational choice as applied, by Anthony Downs (1957), to voting and, thence, to acquiring political information. Its reliance on the rational-choice theory of voting, however, might seem to doom rational-ignorance theory from the start. Rational-choice theory as a whole is often said to have met its Waterloo in the fact that, contrary to its prediction, millions of people *do* vote in mass elections. These voters must either be "irrational," in the sense of having some aim other than the instrumentally rational one of affecting the outcome of the election (Friedman 1995 and 1996); or they must be trying to affect the outcome but, contrary to the theory, must be unaware of the astronomical odds against their vote making a difference.

In the latter case, the rational-choice theory of voting can hardly explain the political ignorance of voters (although it might explain the political ignorance of nonvoters). Voters who are ignorant about politics cannot have "rationally chosen" this ignorance because of their awareness that voting itself is pointless: the fact that they vote shows that they *don't* think it's pointless. Therefore, rational-ignorance theory is in serious trouble unless it is substantially modified.

Ilya Somin's article below sets out to make the needed modifications. First, drawing on work by Derek Parfit (1984) and Aaron Edlin et al. (2003), Somin argues that it *is* rational to vote, if one balances the mini-

mal individual cost of voting against the substantial social benefit of making a difference, in the unlikely event that one's vote is decisive. This calculation justifies "sociotropic" (altruistic) voting as a rational choice. Somin next calculates, however, that the cost of becoming politically well informed is much higher than the cost of merely voting. Thus, while it is rational to vote, it is irrational to become politically well informed. Thus far, then, Somin has produced a theory of rational ignorance that could account both for voting and for voter ignorance.

Somin's third step is to take account of Converse by paying attention to the neglected problem of ideologues. Ideologues are people who, contrary to Somin's second calculation, *do* seem to find it rational to become (relatively) well informed about politics. Are they mistaken?

According to Somin, the answer is no. Ideologues are like sports fans. Their reason for acquiring political information isn't to vote intelligently; their goal is to enjoy the process of rooting for their political "team." With this analogy, Somin is able to fit not only ideologues' relatively high levels of political knowledge, but their dogmatism*,* into a theory of rational ignorance. Like a sports fan who playfully refuses to acknowledge the appeal of other teams (or to admit fully that random circumstances are the only bases of his "choice" of a team), the ideologue would spoil his fun if he fair-mindedly investigated the arguments and evidence for alternative points of view (or critically interrogated the arguments and evidence for his own point of view). Like sports fans, ideologues enjoy taking political sides despite their awareness that, being underinformed about counter-arguments and evidence, their political "attitudes" may well be wrong. Being wrong wouldn't bother them, because being right is not their aim; their goal is to enjoy themselves.

Somin's version of rational-ignorance theory raises vital epistemic questions, while suggesting that even the most thoughtful rational-choice accounts of ignorance lack plausible answers. Rational-ignorance theory effectively treats knowledge not as a fortuitous victory over error, but as the human default position, a goal that we fail to reach only because of our rational decisions to allocate scarce resources elsewhere. There are only so many hours in a day, so we must prioritize our attention and learn only what we need to know if we are to achieve the objective of voting intelligently. Those of us who learn more than this minimum must have a different objective in mind. The unanswered question is: How do we know what we need to know? Or what comes to the same thing: How do we distinguish accurate, relevant,

and impartial unknown information from unknown information that is false or misleading?

These are the very problems that require us to rely on heuristics in our acquisition of knowledge. As Somin points out, our heuristics can be inaccurate. Yet, in the rational-ignorance view, cognitive misers' ignorance is the rational result of an *accurate* calculation of the costs and benefits of acquiring new information.

Let us assume that "wisdom" is not the sort of commodity that pops out of a vending machine if one is just willing to insert enough coins. In that case, ignorance might result from inadvertently "buying" irrelevant, misleading, or simply incorrect information. For example, how would a citizen who has come to accept the culturally transmitted fallacy that "every vote counts" realize that he would benefit from learning what the actual odds are that his vote will "count"? The citizens populating rational-ignorance theory know just what they need to know in order to make *well-informed* choices about . . . just what they need to know. This is a theory of "ignorance" that trivializes that very concept, and that subtly repudiates the possibility of genuine—unwitting—error.

The confusion at work here—itself an example of unwitting error—is traceable to the roots of rational-ignorance theory in mainstream neoclassical economics, where mathematical precision has come to trump verisimilitude (Boettke 1997). Only *perfectly informed* economic actors would behave in a manner that can be mathematically modeled, and can thus be predicted with precision. Thus, for the purposes of neoclassical theory, such actors are assumed to exist. The ghosts of these omniscient agents haunt inherently self-defeating attempts to devise neoclassically inspired economic theories *of ignorance.*

It is said that while walking on the campus of the University of Chicago, Nobel laureate George Stigler joked to a fellow economist that the $20 bill they thought they saw on the ground could not be there, since if it were, some self-interested person would have already known about it and picked it up. The underlying premises are not just that people are instrumentally rational, and not just that they are selfish, and not just that they economize on scarce resources by making choices among alternative uses of them. The key additional assumption is that these rational choosers are fully informed about the alternatives among which they are choosing—and, therefore, that they know what lies on every sidewalk in the world. It gets worse when neoclassical assumptions are applied to "the market for knowledge." The assumptions

produce a theory of cognitive misers so godlike that they are fully in-
formed about which information they can ignore, having accurately
weighed its benefit against the cost of acquiring it. But how can some-
one be fully informed about the objects of his ignorance, without ig-
norance losing any meaning?

Taking Ignorance Seriously

The tricky part of being a cognitive miser—for real, mistake-prone, *rad-
ically* ignorant people (Ikeda 2003)—is making intelligent calculations
about which information is worth learning *before one has learned it*. "In-
formation" is not homogeneous. For all that a radically ignorant person
knows, the next fact that he learns might falsify everything he thinks he
already "knows"—since what he knows may be mistaken. In that event,
the new, falsifying fact would invaluable to him. But before he has
learned the new fact, he cannot know its value. It will seem as worth-
while to learn, or as worthless, as each of the other facts he doesn't
know. So should he devote some of his scarce resources to learning it?

To such a question, the rational-ignorance formula, which holds that
people should—and will—acquire only information whose benefit ex-
ceeds its cost, is no answer at all. If one knew the value of a falsifying
fact, one wouldn't already have the opinions that it falsifies. And if one
does have mistaken opinions, then the contingent chain of events—in-
cluding the misleading heuristics one has deployed—that has led to
one's mistakes may also lead one to misidentify which new information
is worth acquiring.

Whenever the rational-ignorance theorist encounters the appearance
of such a mistake, he will be tempted to come up with a set of *motives*
that could make the error one of appearances only. Whatever people *de-
sire* will determine their resource allocation. If they devote resources to
being misinformed, then being misinformed must give them some sort
of pleasure. In place of epistemology, then, rational-ignorance theory
puts an implausible psychology of *willful* ignorance.

There are very real people, however, who want to know the truth and
want to see justice done. Moreover, they tend to think that their opinions
about truth and justice are so obviously correct that only idiots or "evil
ones" could disagree with them. Personal contact with the politically ac-
tive, or a perusal of the letters to the editor that they write or the terror-
ist acts that they commit, suggests that they think they have hold of im-

portant truths, and that they devote enormous resources to keeping themselves well informed about them. Outrage, anguish, and hatred are not the affects one would expect of people who *know that they don't know what they're talking about* (having deliberately decided, as the rational-ignorance theory would have it, that it doesn't "pay" for them to find out).

The simple statistics of political disagreement guarantee that most, if not all, of these attitude-full people are mistaken. But if mistake is an irrational choice, then knowing the truth about the world so as to improve it *must not be the real goal* of the "mistaken ones," lest they falsify rational-choice theory. So their mistakes must be deliberate, their "ignorance" knowing—perhaps prompted by perverse incentives. Meanwhile, if people *were* motivated to find out the *truth* about politics, they'd succeed—merely by spending enough resources to "acquire" the right facts.

It seems to me to violate not only the relentlessly non-credulous spirit of Converse's epochal paper, but any realistic appreciation of the human situation, to think that the problem of ignorance could be solved if people just tried harder to make themselves wise. If it were that easy, those who sympathize with democracy would not face, in "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," a significant challenge to their own belief system. But it's not. So we do.[12]

APPENDIX: THE "SPIRAL OF CONVICTION" IN
CONVERSE 1964, AND SINCE

A. Did Converse Demonstrate a Spiral of Conviction?

In section III of his 1964 paper (pp. 11–18 of the version we publish below), Converse drew on 1956 data he had analyzed in *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960, ch. 10) in order to segment the general public into various "levels of conceptualization" of politics. Following his practice in *The American Voter,* in his 1964 paper Converse defined the members of the public who had the most sophisticated level of conceptualization as those who, when interviewed in 1956, provided minimally "ideological" reasons for approving or disapproving of the two parties and their presidential candidates. In short, Converse used knowledge of ideology as a test of political sophistication, and he called those who passed this test "ideologues."

Nothing in my claim that Converse shows us a "spiral of conviction" among his ideologically well-informed elite rests on his unusual use of

the word *ideologue.* In calling the reasons offered by his most sophisticated interviewees "ideological," Converse must, I assume, have meant not so much that they were dogmatic—that is my own inference from their attitudinal constraint—but, instead, that the reasons they gave roughly coincided with *liberal* or *conservative* reasoning, circa 1956. I infer this from everything Converse says about the specific nature of the reasons his inverviewees supplied; from the fact that he gives no indication of having encountered other discernible ideologies at work among his respondents; and from the fact that he found it necessary to test for belief systems that were too "idiosyncratic" to show up as conventional conservative or liberal interattitudinal correlations—leading him to the brilliant expedient of looking for intertemporal attitude constraint (pp. 44–52 below).

Therefore, it seems to me, Converse's demonstration that his "ideologues" (and "near-ideologues") were not only more knowledgeable about ideology, but were more "constrained" in their policy attitudes, must mean that they were *more constrained by liberal or conservative ideology.* In this respect, his specially defined "ideologues" seem like ideologues in normal usage. To the precise degree that they understood an ideology, their attitudes tended to be constrained by it. This is important (to me), because the correlation between knowledge of ideology and attitudinal constraint by ideology—dogmatism—constitutes the "spiral of conviction" of which I have written above. And the spiral of conviction is essential to my claim that Converse presents a Hobson's choice between rule by the ignorant masses and rule by highly informed but doctrinaire elites.

In his Reply to this symposium, however, Converse denies that he showed in 1964 that there was a spiral of conviction. He maintains that the relatively knowledgeable elites depicted in his paper may have been "ideologues" in name only. That is, no matter how adept they were at adducing liberal or conservative reasons for approving or disapproving of candidates and parties, they may not have been constrained by liberal or conservative belief systems: they may, he writes, "have been dogged and nasty centrists, for all I know" (p. 310 below).

After correspondence about this point, Converse kindly suggested that I say what I think should be said about it here.

Converse declared in the 1964 paper that its "primary thesis" is that knowledge of ideology "fades out" at the about same point at which ideological constraint does, which he put at roughly the 90th percentile of political information (c. 1956). Assuming that the ideological ignorance

Table 1. "Ideologues," the Ideologically Unconstrained, and Ideological Centrists

	1. A Completely Constrained Liberal	2. A Completely Constrained Conservative	3. A Completely Constrained Centrist	4. A Completely Unconstrained Citizen
Issue				
A	x	y	x	x
B	x	y	y	y
C	x	y	x	x
D	x	y	y	y

The liberal position is always denoted with an x; the conservative position with a y.

in question was ignorance of liberal or conservative belief systems, then my understanding of the primary thesis of the paper is that this ignorance corresponded to unconstrained, which is to say inconsistently liberal or conservative, positions across issues. This understanding of the primary thesis is stylized in Table 1. The crucial point to consider is that columns 1 and 2 depict 100-percent ideological constraint of attitudes by liberal or conservative belief systems (a stylization of the constrained respondents above the threshhold of sophistication), while columns 3 and 4 depict zero constraint *by those belief systems* (which results, of necessity, in taking 50-percent liberal and 50-percent conservative positions, a stylization of the respondents below the threshhold, who are unconstrained by liberalism or conservatism).

I have deliberately patterned the positions of the "unconstrained citizen" in column 4 to be identical to those of the "constrained centrist" in column 3, although there are several patterns on a 4-issue grid where the constrained centrist and the unconstrained citizen might not match each other, position for position, as I have contrived. For example, a constrained centrist might have issue attitudes xxyy, and an unconstrained citizen attitudes yyxx, resulting in no issue matches between the two, but also resulting in an identical (zero) level of liberal or conservative constraint. I contrived to display respondents who are "unconstrained" and respondents who are "constrained centrists" as identical in

order to broach the question of whether there is any difference between the two.

At the operational level, my question is how we could know, absent the labels at the top of the columns, whether someone showing the pattern of responses in either column 3 or 4 is completely unconstrained by liberalism or conservatism, or is completely constrained by centrism. At the conceptual level, how is this a distinction that makes a difference, inasmuch as 100-percent centrism would appear to *mean* 50/50 (i.e., completely unconstrained) liberalism/conservatism?

Converse ([1964] 2006, 3) defines "constraint" as "the success we would have in predicting, given initial knowledge that an individual holds a specified attitude, that he holds certain further ideas and attitudes." This would appear to make the constrained centrist and the unconstrained citizen not only operationally equivalent to, but conceptually identical with, each other. Even if any two of them do not match up issue for issue, they will both display a 50/50 mix of liberal and conservative positions that makes it impossible to predict, from their position on any given issue A, what their position on another issue {B . . . n} will be. The constrained centrist and the unconstrained citizen are thus look-alikes in principle, and what makes them indistinguishable is that both are equally unconstrained by *the only ideologies on offer*, liberalism and conservatism.

For the ideologically knowledgeable *and constrained* elite to include constrained centrists—such that their knowledge of liberalism or conservatism did not correlate with a spiral of liberal or conservative conviction—some of the look-alikes must have been able, as it were, to sneak above the threshhold of constraint and sophistication that Converse located at roughly the 90th percentile of political knowledge. But that would seem to be impossible, since according to the paper's primary thesis, those above that threshhold are both knowledgeable and constrained *liberals or conservatives,* while the operationally and conceptually defining characteristic of a constrained centrist is that he is unconstrained by liberalism or conservatism (except in the trivial sense in which centrism is constrained to be midway between liberalism and conservatism). The lack of liberal or conservative constraint that is inherent to centrism would render the "constrained" centrist's pattern of issue positions unpredictable, and would, therefore, place him in the *unconstrained* majority that is below the threshhold.

This holds true even if "centrism" were a belief system in itself. Per-

haps its "crowning posture" (Converse [1964] 2006, 7) is "Split the dif-
ference," or "Moderation is a virtue." Such a belief system still wouldn't
yield a predictable pattern of liberal/conservative attitudes—xxyy, for
example, rather than yyxx—as opposed to a predictable (50/50) *propor-
tion* of liberal and conservative attitudes. Therefore, a true believer in
the ideology of centrism would continue to be a member of Con-
verse's unconstrained majority.[13]

   It would seem to be different if, unlike in Table 1, the issue positions
in question admitted of degrees, with a perfectly constrained liberal
holding position 0 across all issues, a perfectly constrained conservative
holding position 10, and a perfectly constrained centrist holding posi-
tion 5. This would allow us to detect specifically centrist positions on
issues {A, B . . . n}, such that voters who tended to score between, say, 4
and 6 on most or all issues could be predictably constrained by their
centrism. They would move above the threshhold, while the uncon-
strained citizens left behind would fluctuate unpredictably between 0
and 10 across most or all issues.

   But the now-distinctive constrained centrists above the threshhold
would merely be a third group of ideologues, in the usual sense of that
term: people who have become adherents to a prescribed set of atti-
tudes. Thus, constrained centrists, too, would, by virtue of the corre-
spondence between their knowledge of (centrist) ideology and their
constraint by it, be consistent with a spiral of conviction.

   The adherent of an ideology, Converse ([1964] 2006, 7) wrote, "ex-
periences" it as a "logically constrained cluste[r] of ideas, within which
one part necessarily follows from another." This experience presumably
depends on acquiring a grasp of the "quasi-logical" *but persuasive* rea-
soning that justifies the ideology in the minds of those who are already
its followers. If the reasoning weren't persuasive, it would not produce
the experience of the ideology as logical. Thus, it only stands to reason
that somebody who has acquired "contextual knowledge" of an ideol-
ogy, which is one of the things that puts him into the ideologically "so-
phisticated" elite, will tend to be persuaded by the ideology—acquiring
the attitudinal constraint that is another attribute of the elite.

   I think it is safe to say that people tend to be persuaded by the first
ideology that they find persuasive—and that, almost tautologically, people
who are not persuaded by an ideology must not yet have grasped its rea-
soning in the same way that an adherent has grasped it (perhaps because
they have already grasped a competing ideology). There is also the possi-
bility that they grasp it but, on their own, see through it. Unfortunately,

the correlation between contextual knowledge of an ideology and constraint by it suggests that this last possibility is rarely seen in reality.[14]

B. Is There, In Fact, a Spiral of Conviction?

As Kinder writes below (p. 200), Converse "actually provided rather little evidence on elites, and no evidence at all on the temporal stability (as opposed to the inter-issue consistency at a given time) of their views." What Converse did provide, in his data on inter-issue consistency among elites (Secs. III and V), and in his compelling description of the mind of the ideologue (Sec. II), was an architectonic picture of *the nature of belief systems in elite publics.* The rest of the article, on which so much later attention focused, might best be entitled "The *Absence* of Belief Systems from *Mass* Publics."

Four decades later, however, as Kinder (2006, 200) notes, "we know that political elites hold onto their political beliefs much more resolutely than do common citizens (Converse and Pierce 1986; Jennings 1992; Putnam 1979)." In addition to the sources Kinder cites, there is an abundant and growing post-1964 literature confirming that people tend to screen in attitude-consistent data, and to screen out counterattitudinal data, producing what I am calling a spiral of conviction. As one contributor to this literature summarizes the point: "Giving perceivers the ability to decide to select or reject information produces a bias toward hypothesis matching information and, as a consequence, an increased confidence in the validity of that hypothesis" (Johnston 1996, 799). This is consistent with the view that the reception of new data is screened by, and reinforces, one's prevenient conceptual framework. (Cf. Zuwerink and Devine 1996.)

One of the most explicit papers along these lines is "Biased Assimilation and Attitude Polarization: The Effects of Prior Theories on Subsequently Considered Evidence," by Charles G. Lord, Lee Ross, and Mark R. Lepper (1979). The title speaks for itself. Lord et al. argue that people with prior theories see what the theories prepare them to see when exposed to new information. Thus, "the net effect of exposing proponents and opponents of capital punishment to identical evidence . . . was to increase further the gap between their views" (ibid., 2105). As Lord and his colleagues tellingly put it, their subjects' logical

> sin lay in their readiness to use evidence already processed in a biased manner to bolster the very theory or belief that initially 'justified' the processing bias . . . making their hypotheses unfalsifiable . . . and allow-

ing themselves to be encouraged by patterns of data that they ought to have found troubling. Through such processes laypeople and professional scientists alike find it all too easy to cling to impressions, beliefs, and theories that have ceased to be compatible with the latest and best evidence available. (Lord et al. 1979, 2107.)

It is well worth quoting the political implications that Lord et al. (1979, 2108) draw from their findings:

> Social scientists cannot expect rationality, enlightenment, and consensus about policy to emerge from their attempts to furnish "objective" data about burning social issues. If people of opposing views can each find support for those views in the same body of evidence, it is small wonder that social science research, dealing with complex and emotional social issues and forced to rely upon inconclusive designs, measures, and modes of analysis, will frequently fuel rather than calm the fires of debate.

(Cf. Friedman 2005.)

Most of the post-1964 spiral-of-conviction-friendly literature has been generated by social psychologists. An important exception is found in the work of political scientist Milton Lodge and various colleagues. Lodge and Ruth Hamill's 1986 paper, "A Partisan Schema for Information Processing," argued that partisans "remember more schema-consistent than schema-inconsistent information" (Lodge and Hamill 1986, 508; but see Eagly et al. 2000). And Charles S. Taber and Lodge's 2006 "Motivated Skepticism in the Evaluation of Political Beliefs" shows that adherents of a belief screen in preveniently acceptable information while screening out discrepant data. The self-reinforcing effect of prior beliefs, according to Taber and Lodge (2006, 760), "is systematic and robust among sophisticates and those who feel the strongest."

The Taber and Lodge paper, which strikes me as providing powerful experimental proof of the spiral of conviction, extends the "motivated reasoning" line of research that has built on the work of psychologist Ziva Kunda (1987 and subsequently). But in so doing, it raises the question of whether, as I am echoing Lippmann in proposing, the basis of the spiral of conviction is ultimately cognitive. Taber and Lodge, like the motivated-reasoning researchers in psychology departments (e.g., Lundgren and Prislin 1998), hold a different, affective view. In this view, people attach emotional weight to their attitudes, which leads them to stubbornly resist changing their minds when counterattitudinal infor-

mation appears. "Selective biases and polarization," Taber and Lodge (2006, 756) write, "are triggered by an initial (and uncontrolled) affective response."

Taber and Lodge have experimental data to back up this assertion. Still, while their data show the powerful effect of affect, I wonder how often affect can initially be attached to a political attitude without a prior cognitive rationale, however tacit, to justify the positive or negative direction of the affect. Even in the case of racial prejudice, which might appear to be purely affectual, is it not usually the case that there is some claim of racial inferiority or racial danger that must be conveyed to the racist socially or culturally, so that his affect toward the racial group will be negative? (Even the well-established psychological tendency to identify affectually with groups [e.g., Tajfel 1981], and to be hostile to out-group members, would seem to require some culturally defined, hence cognitive, definition of who counts as a member of the in-group. Thus, for example, nationalist sentiments, however irrational, presumably cannot occur until one is taught that one is a member of a particular "nation," to which one may then attach allegiance.)

The same reasoning would seem to apply, all the more so, to people's affective ties with political parties or ideologies. Even if one picked up an emotional identification with liberalism or the Democratic party from one's liberal or Democratic parents, mightn't they have thereby conveyed some initial, functional equivalent to the cognition that "liberalism is compassionate," or that "the Democrats defend the interests of working people and the disadvantaged"? If so, then Converse's 1964 language about the role of belief systems in "organizing" people's political perceptions, so reminiscent of Lippmann's discussion of the *cognitive* function of political "stereotypes," would be largely, if not entirely, compatible with the literature on motivated reasoning.

NOTES

1. Including some very important work of Achen: see Achen and Bartels 2002 and 2004.
2. See the Appendix to this Introduction.
3. Converse does not deny that this, too, is a matter of degree. The masses have their own constraining beliefs; each ideologue will have a slightly different take on the implications of her ideology (Converse [1964] 2006, 8); and even the most creative synthesizer of a "new" belief system must be drawing on "old"

materials (the materials that are on offer at that point in the history of ideas) in order to have something to synthesize.

4. For more evidence along the same lines, see Part B of the Appendix to this Introduction.

5. I assume that Converse means that ideological voters are relatively well informed about, and thus are better able to be instrumentally rational about, which candidate or party to support in pursuit of their political preferences. This does not, of course, mean that the preferences themselves are well informed or rational; see below.

6. Too often, political scientists proceed as if such causal theories are unimportant. As Arthur Lupia points out below, if one then assumes a simple correspondence between one's values or interests and the policies or politicians one should favor, the cognitive demands of politics are reduced to questions of, essentially, which party or politician favors the policy that self-evidently tracks one's interests or values. If someone is poor, for example, and if the criterion for the right vote is that person's economic self-interest, it is thought that the person should vote Democratic, such that all the information she needs is which politician is a Democrat. But what is at stake in political debate is very often such questions as whether a "rising-tide-lifts-all-boats" policy of tax cutting, typically favored by Republicans, will serve the poor better than transfer programs, typically favored by Democrats. In this light, to use party proxies (for example) is to beg the questions at issue in politics. Put differently, it is to display ignorance of the alternative theories underlying party positions.

7. The extensive literature on ideological and partisan heuristics, or "cues" (e.g., Popkin 1991; and many of the papers in Ferejohn and Kuklinski 1990, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991, Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000, and Kuklinski 2001), establishes that members of the public are aware of politics enough to "think" about it, in the sense of picking up signals about appropriate "attitudes" emanating from trusted ideological and partisan sources. But this seems to me orthogonal to what is normatively troubling about Converse's findings, which is not so much public inattention to politics, as public ignorance of good information about political concerns; and is not so much whether the public thinks about politics at all as whether it thinks about it logically. These latter issues go to the heart of whether members of the public are *right* to be ideologues or partisans of one stripe or another, and therefore to take cues from like-minded elites.

8. I borrow the term from Michael Sandel (1982, 117, 121), who aptly used it to characterize a defect of deontological liberalism. This did not stop him from reproducing voluntarism in his own, communitarian alternative. See Friedman 2002, chs. 2–3.

9. It is not accidental that another leading communitarian theorist, Michael Walzer (1981), set forth the boldest version of democratic voluntarism. To privilege the will of the majority as nearly inviolate, as Walzer does, is to put the majority in the same place in which communal "identity" is placed by communitarianism.

10. See Friedman 2002, ch. 7. I gesture at criticizing Islamic theological voluntarism in Friedman 2006.

11. In Downs's theory, voting is linked with being informed, since both are too costly to justify the benefits. One of the purposes of Somin's theory is to break the link, so as to allow for the fact that most voters are uninformed. But the link remains—if the voters, *ex hypothesi,* really understand rational-choice theory. It would not make sense to vote, even for sociotropic reasons, unless one were satisfied that one's opinions were adequately well informed to be sociotropically helpful, not harmful. Casting an uninformed vote is never sociotropically rational. Yet casting an uninformed vote is just what Converse suggested is the norm. One may perhaps conclude that one of the things of which ignorant voters are ignorant is their own ignorance.

12. For reasons of space I have avoided the obvious question of how public ignorance can pose a challenge to democracy if ignorance is rooted in cognitive limitations that are part of the human condition, and would thus plague *any* system of government. In brief, my answer is that we should explore institutional arrangements that require less theorizing about unseen causes and effects than *social* democracy entails, because theorizing about social causation in a modern—post-hunter-gatherer—context is not what we were built to do. See Friedman 2005.

13. If centrism were a belief system that yielded a *specific* pattern of 50-percent liberal positions on some issues (e.g., issues A and B) and 50-percent conservative positions on others (say, C and D), then the constrained centrist could be expected to adhere to those specific issue positions over time, whereas Converse showed that those who were relatively ignorant of liberal and conservative ideology also tended to mix liberal and conservative issue positions at random over time—and thus, by implication, at any given moment in time.

14. I acknowledge that throughout my argument for a "spriral of conviction," I have assumed that people mainly learn *one* ideology sympathetically—because of its persuasive quasi-logic—and that if one learns a competing ideology at all, it is done later, and, by virtue of that very fact, less thoroughly—especially when it comes to the reasons that are supposed to justify the various issue positions packaged together in ideological form. Knowledge of an ideology with which one disagrees must overcome not only one's affective hostility, but the preceding accumulation of evidence for one's own ideology, which (I argue) makes it seem increasingly self-evident.

    The primary basis of these assumptions is my experience over many years, especially with the inept attempts of even the most scrupulous scholars to do justice to the arguments of those with whom they disagree—especially ideologically. Nothing in Converse 1964 addresses knowledge of an ideology with which one disagrees. Converse looked for knowledge of "ideolog*ies*," not of one or another ideology, and while the interview transcripts probably shed some light on whether given respondents were equally familiar with the reasons for liberal *and* conservative attitudes, I'm not sure that the probing in these interviews would have reached the level at which the glaring deficiencies in a conservative's understanding of liberalism, or vice versa, would be revealed.

    It is possible, then, that Converse's "ideologues" knew as much about both

ideologies on offer, even though they were constrained by only one of them. My suspicion is that one would not be constrained by that which one didn't find persuasive, and that once one found an ideology persuasive, it would start reinforcing itself as it enabled one to perceive a rich array of examples that would make it seem like a profound window onto the world. Meanwhile, any knowledge one gained of an ideology that one found unpersuasive would not perform this screening in of congruent information, such that one's knowledge of it would remain thin, abstract, and caricatural. But more work could probably be done to see whether Converse's and subsequent data bear out the notion of respondents who were equally knowledgeable of both ideologies, but unpersuaded by either.