CHAPTER 5

Strategic Politicians, Emotional Citizens, and the Rhetoric of Prediction

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This chapter considers how politicians use rhetoric to promote their policies, how citizens respond to that rhetoric, and the consequences of their responses for the competence of public opinion. We focus on a particular type of rhetorical appeal—those based on emotionally charged predictions about policy consequences. We argue that such appeals are often central to policy debate and that they are extremely difficult for citizens to deal with intelligently. We suggest that the processes by which citizens respond to prediction-based rhetoric are crucial to the direction and character of collective opinion, and we sketch a preliminary theory of those processes.

To understand these interactions between politicians and citizens, we adopt the unconventional practice of applying two distinct analytic approaches to the two categories of actor. For politicians, we emphasize maximizing and strategic behavior, reflecting their full-time employment in politics and large personal stakes in political outcomes. For ordinary citizens, we stress affect- and emotion-driven mental processes, reflecting their fleeting attention to politics and their lack of incentives to calculate carefully. Our argument, stated briefly, is as follows: Political leaders want to win policy debates and they employ rhetoric in an effort to move public opinion to their respective sides. To ensure that their presumptive supporters remain loyal, they mostly proclaim partisan or ideological principles: for example, "Republicans put their faith in state and local governments." To sway those citizens who are generally not aligned with either party or hold no ideological tendencies, however, they mostly make predictions about consequences. These predictions are often negative and dire—"under national health care reform, you'll lose the freedom to choose your doctor"—and designed to elicit negative emotions, especially fear and anger. The result is an emotionally charged politics that undermines at least many citizens' ability to make reasoned policy choices and compromises the intelligence of collective opinion.

Our discussion is divided into three main sections. The first uses Anthony Downs's *An Economic Theory of Democracy* as a starting point but

amends his framework in several ways. The resulting framework explains how political parties seek to win policy debates by gaining public support for their favored policies, rather than merely competing to offer policies that citizens already prefer. It also makes some important distinctions about the available means of gaining such support. The second section uses these distinctions to identify several varieties of political rhetoric, and singles out one form of it—appealing to extreme and predominantly negative predictive claims—as generally central to politicians' persuasive efforts. It then illustrates the prominence of such claims, using two real-world high-stakes political conflicts that occurred 150 years and thousands of miles apart.

The final, and most speculative, section discusses the psychological processes of citizens' responses to predictive claims. We discuss and largely reject two views in the literature—one emphasizing heuristics, the other emotion-induced learning—that would tend to discount either citizens' needs to deal with predictive rhetoric at all or the difficulty for them of doing so competently. We argue, in contrast, that citizens use a variety of casual, mostly unconscious, and minimally reliable methods of assessing and responding to predictive claims.

Our emphasis on initially nonaligned voters warrants a comment. These are the people who either do not readily identify themselves with any political faction, or if they do, identify with one that fails to give clear guidance on a particular issue. Their importance stems from the simple fact that they often determine the citizenry's majority position.

HOW PARTIES COMPETE: THE DOWNSIAN MODEL REVISITED

More than 40 years ago, Anthony Downs introduced a model of party competition that still structures much thinking about the relationship between politicians and public opinion. The model makes three key assumptions: voters' preferences are fixed, voters' preferences are normally distributed along a single liberal-conservative dimension, and parties are self-interested actors whose primary goal is to win elections. It predicts that in a polity where citizens' ideological preferences are unimodal in distribution, two rational, competing parties will move toward the median voter to maximize electoral support. Importantly, in the present context, the model does not expect that the parties will make efforts to change those preferences.

In recent years, the Downsian median voter model has come under considerable criticism. Most scholars now acknowledge the empirical inaccuracy of the model's principal prediction—that two competing parties will converge on the ideological center. Notoriously, they instead stake out sharply differing positions, closer to the respective ends of the ideological spectrum. Supporters of the Downsian model have offered a straightforward remedy to this discrepancy: introduce party activists who take extreme positions and can compel the parties to respond to their preferences in order to maintain their contributions of money and effort (Aldrich, 1983; Aranson & Ordeshook, 1972; Coleman, 1972; May, 1973; for an alternative perspective, see Adams & Merrill, 1999; Rabinowitz & MacDonald, 1989). With this addition, these scholars argue, it is possible to retain the model's basic structure while also accommodating the relatively extreme positions that parties adopt on policy.

Other scholars have argued against this simple solution, contending that the main problem with Downs's model is the erroneous assumption that citizens' preferences are fixed (see, e.g., Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). In their view, the very reason for public political debate between parties is to sway those preferences in one or the other direction.

This criticism is headed in a useful direction, but in our view it accepts too much of Downs's conceptual framework to be persuasive. Downs construes public preferences in terms of a broad ideological dimension, essentially a relative preference between two opposing values or sets of values. Here, Downs would seem correct: such values arguably should remain stable over long periods of time. And there is little reason for politicians to invest limited resources in an effort to change them. At most, they might try to change the relative salience of certain values by priming some and not others (e.g., Chong & Druckman, 2007; Iyengar & Kinder, 1987).

Apart from general values, however, Downs's framework overlooks two elements that are important to the parties' efforts to shape opinion. One is citizens' beliefs pertinent to a particular deliberation. Politicians often try to shape citizens' beliefs about current conditions and the likelihood that particular outcomes will occur if a policy is or is not put into law (e.g., Jerit, 2009; Lupia & Menning, 2009). Will a tax cut stimulate investment and economic growth? Will it force cuts in needed programs? Will coercive methods of interrogation protect the country from terrorist attack? By failing to incorporate efforts to shape such beliefs, Downs eliminates the issue-by-issue give-and-take of real politics from his model.

Politicians can attempt to form and change such beliefs, fundamentally, because of the role of uncertainty in policy decisions. There is always considerable and sometimes enormous uncertainty about the impact of

proposed policies (see, e.g., Riker, 1996).[1] Not even experts really know the consequences of a policy in advance. Indeed, even Downs recognizes this uncertainty and its implications for elite persuasion. In a chapter titled "How Uncertainty Affects Government Decision Making," he points out that in the absence of uncertainty, voters' preferences over specific policies are fixed because they are rational deductions from the voters' views of the good society. However, in an uncertain world,

> [r]oads leading toward the good society are hard to distinguish from those leading away from it. Thus, even though voters have fixed goals, their views on how to approach those goals are malleable and can be altered by persuasion. Consequently, leadership can be exercised on most policy questions . . . . (Downs, 1957, p. 87)

Such views are more than merely malleable, however. Citizens often hold no definite beliefs at all about the consequences of a given policy until they encounter debate about it, giving politicians important opportunities to influence their decisions by creating or changing those beliefs.

The other overlooked element is citizens' preferences about specific policies, as opposed to their general values or ideology. Politicians debate policy alternatives, and citizens are asked to choose among them. In fact politicians rarely have occasion to debate broad ideological principles, except in making a case for a particular policy. Moreover, citizens' preferences about specific policies are by no means simply determined by their general values. For example, the public initially gave strong support to the Clinton administration's 1993 national health care proposal; but as a result of powerful criticism, largely in the form of dire predictions, that support faded over a period of a few months and the proposal died without coming to the House or Senate floor (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). There was no evidence of any broad shift in general values during those months.

A perspective that can account for party competition to persuade citizens, therefore, will take into account at least three elements of citizens' thinking. First, general values or ideology apply to a wide range of policies, and are generally quite stable over the short run. Parties cannot change them significantly. They can, however, attempt to prime certain values and thus increase their salience for citizens temporarily. Second, beliefs are largely specific to a particular policy; they concern consequences

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[1] Riker (1990) distinguishes between outcomes and alternatives. Although there is often uncertainty regarding both, most of it is associated with the future impacts of competing policies.

of adopting or failing to adopt that policy. Such beliefs are often far more movable than values, and politicians make frequent efforts to influence them. Finally, there are preferences regarding specific policies, and these, too, are subject to influence. Apart from electioneering, citizens' policy preferences are usually the principal object of politicians' influence efforts.

Two implications of this admittedly simplified account warrant emphasis. First, the main mechanisms for producing change in public preferences about policies are, on one hand, the priming of values and, on the other hand, the formation and modification of relevant beliefs. The parameters of the two mechanisms will vary across citizen groups. Among the highly partisan, who hold relatively extreme positions on the relevant values, the primed political value will generally dominate decisions. If a strong Republican is reminded that a decision is about the value of free enterprise, that cinches her decision. Among the unaligned, on the other hand, beliefs might vary widely and will carry the greater weight.

Second, politicians' rhetoric will play a major role in triggering both mechanisms. Suppose, for example, that members of the two parties in the U.S. Congress are debating whether to provide social services to illegal immigrants. Democratic leaders can appeal to their core supporters on the grounds of humanity, and Republican leaders to their core supporters on the grounds of legality. Leaders of each party can also try to shape beliefs about the consequences of providing or not providing such services: "If we deny services, children will suffer illness and even die"; "If we provide services, more illegal immigrants will swarm into the country, and break the budgets of state governments." In the next section, we consider politicians' rhetoric more fully.

THE FUNCTIONS AND DYNAMICS OF POLITICAL RHETORIC

Despite the now-popular idea that citizens use politicians' cues to help them make decisions (e.g., Carmines & Kuklinski, 1991; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Lupia, 1994; Mondak, 1993) and the publication of Zaller's highly influential book showing that elite discourse shapes public opinion (Zaller, 1992; also see Brody, 1991; Johnston, Blais, Brady, & Crete, 1992; Jones, 1994), scholars have been slow to explore what politicians actually say and do when they debate policy.[2] In his posthumously published book,

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[2] For example, Zaller's empirical measurement consists of the number of statements for and against a policy in *The New York Times* and news magazines.

Riker summarizes the state of affairs as it existed nearly 15 years ago (1996, p. 4):

> We have learned quite a bit about voters' preconceptions, habits, and decisions . . . . But we have very little knowledge about the rhetorical content of campaigns [and policy debates], which is, however, their principal feature. Consequently, we do not know much substantively about how policies are presented [and] discussed . . . .

His words apply equally well today.

Three Forms of Political Rhetoric

Politicians say many things during the course of a policy debate, and so the first task is to identify the forms that political rhetoric and argument can take. From the perspective of politicians seeking to persuade citizens, the three potentially most valuable forms are assertions of core party values and principles, predictions of future states,[3] and factual descriptions of current circumstances. All three forms of political rhetoric are motivated by party leaders' desires to sway opinion in the preferred direction, although each form has its own purpose.

Competing political parties espouse core values to ensure that their usual followers support the parties' positions, and to demonstrate their loyalty to those values. When Democratic leaders assert that "We must pass this bill because Democrats will not accept working men and women going without good health care," they are both reaffirming a long-held value—the welfare of the working class—and telling their supporters what the correct position on the bill is. Similarly, when Republican leaders argue against a bill by saying that "Republicans cannot support this program because the services should be provided by state and local governments," they are

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[3] Sniderman (2000) argues that the defining feature of political rhetoric is value conflict: elites make opposing claims about the course of action that the country *should* follow. And they do this, Sniderman claims, for purely instrumental reasons: "To attract the support of their partisans in the electorate as a whole, parties have to present themselves not as opportunistic actors but as agents acting under an obligation to devise a principled and coherent approach to public policy" (p. 127). We agree that value-based arguments are an important part of politicians' rhetoric. In fact, we have looked at the dynamics between predictions and value-based assertions elsewhere (Jerit, 2002). Sniderman presumably would also agree that appeals to values cannot fully explain the dynamics of political debate. If politics were solely about values, each side would assert its values early, and citizens would line up on one side or the other. As we will show shortly, empirically that is not the case. Moreover, value-based arguments are not likely to sway those who are not swayed by them at the outset.

simultaneously invoking a traditional value—decentralized government—and conveying their party's position on the specific proposal. Mobilizing and keeping the party faithful in line is an essential task; and the best way to accomplish it is to play on the core values that brought people to the party in the first place.

Not everyone is among the party faithful, however. There is a sizable group of citizens who do not initially favor one party over the other, or who only lean toward one of them. These are the citizens who must be persuaded that one policy position is more compelling than the other. As we noted earlier, these initially unaligned citizens often determine on which side majority public opinion will fall.

So how might the parties convince them? Riker (1996) argues that the most effective appeals take the form of predictions about what will happen if a policy proposal is or is not passed. Playing on uncertainty, especially the possibility of bad consequences, he contends, will sway citizens. At any point in time, of course, this strategy is available to both parties. Writing in 1991, Lau, Smith, and Fiske (p. 645) observe that "the most frequently attempted manipulation—and the one to which advocates devote most of their creative energy and time—is the formulation and presentation of 'interpretations' of various policy proposals," where an interpretation "consists of a set of arguments about the [future] consequences of a policy proposal."

The specific content of these predictions is almost limitless: "Time limited welfare reform will lead to increased hunger and homelessness"; "Time limits will promote work"; "Without welfare reform, the country will soon face a financial disaster"; "If government does not bail out the auto industry, unemployment will rise to levels never before witnessed in the United States"; "Without welfare reform, we will create yet another generation who cannot care for themselves"; "If we pass this health bill, many Americans will lose their freedom to choose their doctors." More often than not, Riker argues, the competing parties will predict negative and wholly different consequences.

If parties assert core values to keep the faithful on board and make dire predictions to sway the initially unaligned, why, when, and how do they use facts? Certainly they do not use them to help citizens make objective, fact-based decisions. The parties' primary goal is to sway citizens, not to educate them, and thus they will use facts accordingly. This implies that, as a matter of timing, parties will use facts about existing conditions when they serve the parties' interests. Democrats will cite a high unemployment rate during a Republican administration but not during a Democratic one. Republicans will do the opposite.

Moreover, parties can and will state the same fact in different ways. Democrats, for example, will note that only 2% of the total national budget goes toward welfare payments. Republicans will cite the actual amount of money spent, since $30 billion sounds much greater than 2%.[4] As Tversky and Kahneman (1981; see also Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) have documented in a variety of settings, different presentations of identical situations produce different choices. But even if competing political parties should cite the same fact in the same form, they will interpret it differently (Gaines, Kuklinski, Quirk, Peyton, & Verkuilen (2008). Especially in politics, "getting the facts right" is neither easy nor a high priority (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).[5]

A Strategy of Political Rhetoric

In Downs's median voter model, the two parties want to win elections. To that end, they move to the middle of the ideological spectrum when making policy. Adding beliefs to the model changes expectations about party behavior. If parties can shape beliefs, and thus preferences, by taking advantage of uncertainty and strategically using rhetoric, then winning elections and winning policy debates through rhetorical persuasion are both possible, if not mutually reinforcing.

Political rhetoric will not evolve in precisely the same way across different policy debates. Nevertheless, we expect the general pattern to resemble the following: The parties use a variety of appeals to form or change people's beliefs, including appeals to values, references to fact, and predictions about the outcomes of policy alternatives. Appeals to values occur early, for purposes of keeping the party faithful in line. Also early, each party decides whether to cite facts, doing so only when "the facts" can be used to advantage. Over the duration of a debate, and especially when they feel a need to compete ever more strenuously for support of nonaligned voters, the parties increasingly rely on dire predictions. Supporters of the status quo argue that current conditions are not so bad and, more crucially, predict that the proposed policy will produce serious adverse consequences. Supporters of change cite currently intolerable conditions that will worsen under the status quo.

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[4] Although not direct quotes, the figures are reasonable representations of the actual figures as of the mid-1990s, when Congress debated and adopted welfare reform.

[5] We have referred to "the two sides" or "the two parties" several times throughout our discussion. That policy debates almost always devolve into two, not three or four, sides is itself an interesting phenomenon, which we will explore in future research.

To maximize the impact of their predictions, politicians predict absolutely rather than probabilistically: "If policy *x* passes, consequence *y* will follow," not "if policy *x* passes, there is a 40 percent likelihood that consequence *y* will follow." Rarely do parties and politicians include causal explanations with their predictions. Adding an explanation of a prediction may only raise questions about it and soften its impact?

Rhetoric to Evoke Emotions

When politicians predict that "passage of this bill will lead to a dramatic increase in taxes" or that "young kids are dying of starvation and we are doing nothing about it" or that "this bill will increase hostility between blacks and whites," they intend to activate emotions in the process of shaping citizens' beliefs about future outcomes. The two emotions that dire predictions most naturally evoke are fear and anger. Many predictions— "this bill will dramatically increase your taxes" and "unless we act, even more high-school graduates will be unable to afford college"— evoke both.

In recent years, psychologists, neurologists, and cognitive scientists have published pathbreaking work on emotions (see, among other works, Adolphs, Tranel, & Damasio, 1998; Barkow, Cosmides, & Tooby, 1992; Brader, 2005, 2006; Damasio, 1994, 1999; DeSteno, Petty, Rucker, Wegener, & Braverman, 2004; Ekman, 1992; LeDoux, 1996; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Rather than repeat what these scholars have written, we only note the following. First, not only are fear and anger basic emotions, but they also are short-term reactions to specific targets (Lerner & Keltner, 2000). They should be natural, expected reactions to political rhetoric designed to create beliefs. Second, we have already noted that citizens likely will receive conflicting if not contradictory predictions simultaneously. They might hear that passing the legislation will create this to-be-feared condition and that not passing the legislation will create that to-be-feared condition. How citizens make decisions under such circumstances is a topic to which we return in the final section of this chapter.

TWO CASE STUDIES OF POLITICAL RHETORIC

We have offered several propositions about how politicians should behave when they believe they can shape citizens' beliefs. We have been testing these propositions with a variety of case studies. Despite obvious limitations, case studies afford an opportunity that quantitative studies do not: to explore parties' and politicians' political rhetoric in detail.

Here, we briefly summarize the results of two case studies. In both instances, the stakes were exceptionally high, with citizens and their political leaders facing the possibility of a constitutional crisis. Emphasizing the importance of making the "right" choice, competing politicians on both sides of each issue used rhetoric strategically, for the singular purpose of moving public opinion in the desired direction.

The Lincoln–Douglas Debates

The Lincoln-Douglas debates represent one of the most instructive episodes in American history for considering the character of political rhetoric in major policy debates.[6] From late August through mid-October of 1858, incumbent Illinois Democratic senator Stephan A. Douglas and Republican challenger Abraham Lincoln held a series of seven debates at locations around the state. The debates concerned the Senate election and were not strictly a referendum on a policy question. In fact, senators were indirectly elected, and the contestants were actually seeking to influence voters' choices between the two parties in the state legislative elections. Both candidates, however, focused their remarks entirely on the issue of slavery, by far the most important and controversial policy debate of the 19th century, if not American history. As the centerpiece of a vigorously contested Senate campaign (Lincoln gave 63 other speeches, Douglas 130), the debates received great attention in Illinois newspapers and extensive coverage in the national press. In view of the Lincoln–Douglas contest, the *New York Times* called Illinois "the most interesting political battleground in the Union."

Scholars often cite the Lincoln–Douglas debates as the highpoint of popular debate in American politics, and as setting a standard of excellence that even the best contemporary debates do not approach. And they were indeed remarkable in relation to today's practices. Each debate lasted 3 hours, for a total of 21 hours of debate on a single issue. In what would now be regarded a heroic feat of attentive citizenship, audiences of up to 10,000 listened to the speakers without benefit of seating, amplification, or access to a refrigerator. Reporters skilled in shorthand recorded the speeches, and the state's two leading newspapers published verbatim accounts. With some dissents, commentators have praised the intellectual depth of the exchanges and, in particular, their clarity in revealing the competing principles of American political culture (Jaffa, 1959). In short, they are presumably the limiting case

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[6] Except where otherwise cited, our account of the Lincoln–Douglas debate relies on Donald 1995, Ch. 8.

of an advocacy campaign that, in principle, should have enhanced citizen competence.

What do the Lincoln–Douglas debates reveal about the strategy of political rhetoric? As their admirers have stressed, they did indeed feature notably direct exchanges on general issues of political principle. Douglas, who advocated allowing each state or territory to decide the question of slavery for itself, appealed to the principle of popular sovereignty. He professed indifference to the outcome of the decision on slavery, as long as the decision was made by majority rule. He also faced squarely the issue of the exclusion of blacks from the relevant majority, arguing that Negroes were an inferior race and that the Constitution and Declaration of Independence were written by, and for the benefit of, white people exclusively.

Lincoln, who opposed the expansion of slavery into the territories and insisted that it must somehow end, did not exactly advocate full social or political equality for blacks. But he refuted Douglas's historical claim of a for-whites-only Constitution. He stressed that blacks were part of mankind and, regardless of specific constitutional provisions concerning slavery, were in no way excluded from the political community. In contrast to Douglas's appeal to popular sovereignty, Lincoln grounded his argument in the notion of inalienable individual rights, a position that enabled him to conclude that slavery was simply "wrong." Both Lincoln and Douglas appeared to invite citizens to make their decisions on grounds of political principle.

In fact, however, neither candidate relied primarily on the persuasive force of such principles. To do their persuasive heavy lifting, both relied largely on predictions of consequences and attributions of intent that were sufficiently extreme and alarming that, if taken seriously, would render citizens' relative priorities between the opposing principles virtually moot. In his opening statement in the first debate, Douglas set forth the major theme that he would pursue throughout the campaign. He charged that Lincoln had been conspiring since 1854 to create "an Abolition party, under the name and guise of a Republican Party." Lincoln, he alleged, wanted to suppress self-government and abolish slavery in every state, both North and South. Douglas pronounced this policy "revolutionary and destructive of the existence of this Government" (*Founder's Library*, *The Lincoln–Douglas Debates*). He closed with a frightening prediction:

> I believe that this new doctrine preached by Mr. Lincoln and his party will dissolve the Union if it succeeds. They are trying to array all the Northern States in one body against the South, to excite a sectional war between the free States and the slave States, in order that the one or the other may be driven to the wall. (Founder's Library, *The Lincoln–Douglas Debates*)

Lincoln rejected the charge of abolitionism, quoting one of his earlier speeches to demonstrate that he simply did not know what to do about ending slavery. He also leveled a comparably alarming charge against Douglas: that his objective was to extend slavery to the entire nation. "[H]e is eradicating the light of reason and the love of liberty" to perpetuate slavery, Lincoln added, and went on to predict that Douglas would try to invade Mexico and Latin America to secure more territory for the expansion of slavery (Donald, 1995).

As the series of debates proceeded, each candidate largely stuck with his initial themes. In fact, instead of the exchanges helping to clarify issues, narrow differences, and discipline rival claims, the opposing predictions and attributions became, if anything, more extreme. In the fourth debate, Lincoln used most of his opening speech to endorse an unsubstantiated charge by another Republican that Douglas had been part of a plot to legalize slavery in Kansas. In his last statement in the final debate, Douglas, whose earlier allegation of Lincoln's abolitionism had some basis in reality, ascended to a new height of alarmism. Lincoln's plan to limit the expansion of slavery, he argued, was genocidal. It would confine slaves to land where they could not support themselves. The extinction of slavery that Lincoln promised would really result in "extinguishing the Negro race."

In the edifying view favored by most scholars, the Lincoln–Douglas debates informed Illinois citizens "that what was at stake was not just the choice between two candidates or political parties; it was a choice between two fundamentally opposed views of the meaning of the American experience . . . . [with] Douglas as the advocate of majority rule and Lincoln as the defender of minority rights." But this philosophic formulation overlooks the nature of the candidates' most strenuous efforts to persuade. Their rhetoric defined the voters' choice as a high-stakes bet about the relative credibility of two nightmares: that Lincoln would promote abolition, push the country toward civil war, and promote genocide; or that Douglas would work to impose slavery even in the Northern states. Even if voters could judge which "meaning of the American experience" they preferred, that judgment would not tell them which potential nightmare was more real.

Scotland: The 1997 Devolution Referendum

The election of a Labour government in the United Kingdom in the spring of 1997 ushered in one of the most eventful periods in Scottish political history. As part of his campaign manifesto, Prime Minister Tony Blair pledged that Scotland would have a parliament with law-making powers, including the capacity to raise revenue. He promised to put this matter before the people of Scotland in the form of a binding referendum later that fall. The question

of home rule had been put to the Scottish people once before, in 1979, but the measure had gone down to defeat. This time around, however, the referendum had two parts. The first question asked whether "there should be a Scottish parliament," the second "whether a Scottish parliament should have tax-varying powers."

A simple majority was needed to pass the referendum, although it was possible that the Scots might vote "Yes, No"—that is, they might vote *for* the creation of their own parliament, but *against* giving it the power to vary the income tax. This was in fact a very real concern. Although public support for the first question was strong, supporters of the second question barely constituted a majority. What's more, the percentage of people claiming to be undecided on the second question ranged anywhere from 18 to 24 percent. Incidentally, the percentage of undecided voters was not much lower on the first question, which suggests that passage of the first question was hardly a foregone conclusion. History is particularly instructive in this regard: last-minute shifts in public opinion killed the 1979 referendum.

Given the large number of unaligned voters on both questions, neither side could take anything for granted. Winning the referendum meant winning over these voters. As a result, elites on both sides of the issue attempted to shape beliefs about the consequences of devolved power, especially in relation to the economy and Scotland's ties to the United Kingdom.

In the beginning of the debate, opponents of devolution attempted to persuade citizens that the creation of a Scottish Parliament would lead to conflict with Westminster and the eventual breakup of the United Kingdom. One Tory MP claimed that "a parliament in Edinburgh would be the forerunner to an independent socialist republic" ("The Scotts are on the March," 1997). John Major was only slightly less restrained in his assessment when he warned that the future of the United Kingdom was at stake and that "the best interests of all the nations in the UK—in a dangerous and shifting world—are best served by staying together" (Watson, 1997). That same day, he made a series of stark predictions about the impact of devolution: "Would Scotland be weaker or stronger then? Weaker. Would Scotland attract more or less investment? Less. Would Scotland have a stronger or weaker voice in the European Union? Weaker. And so would the rest of the UK" (Donegan, April 24, 1997).

Officials in the Labour party responded to these attacks by pointing out that a Scottish parliament's powers would be clearly defined and would not include the power to create a separate Scottish state. On several occasions, Tony Blair went so far as to claim that a devolved parliament "could never proceed via referendum to independence." But this

particular line of argument ran the risk of offending the Scots, especially those who favored independence. Labour therefore altered its strategy and began responding with an opposing prediction. Because devolution was the "sensible middle way" (between the status quo and separation), Labour asserted that it would save, rather than destroy, the Union.

From the moment Blair launched his campaign manifesto, arguments regarding the second question—should a Scottish parliament have tax-varying powers—dominated the debate. Opponents charged that it would hurt the business climate and that "companies would move south of the border to avoid higher taxes" ("Business tries to avoid tartan trap," 1997). At first, Labour simply tried to emphasize the difference between having the power to tax and the use of such powers. It quickly resorted to a much stronger formulation. Blair asserted that "Labour has absolutely no plans to raise taxes in Scotland, whatever the powers conferred on a devolved parliament" (Ahmed, April 8, 1997). Of course, the crucial piece of information, and one that was noticeably absent from most news reports, was the fact that Blair's guarantee was contingent upon Labour winning a majority of the seats. No one could be certain that this would happen, given that the new parliament would be elected under proportional representation.

In the months to come, elites would continue to debate the effects of tax-raising powers and the future of the union. But the substance of these arguments changed in important ways. Claims became more specific, and at the same time, more extreme. Proponents portrayed the constitutional change as if it was a magic elixir. The following statement by Scotland's Devolution Minister is a characteristic example: "Apart from making government closer to the people, [a Scottish Parliament] would boost the Scottish economy, attract investors, and unleash intellectual energy generated by devolution" (Smith, June 25, 1997). Others claimed that a Scottish parliament would reduce "brain drain"—the tendency of young, talented Scots to pursue their careers beyond the country's borders. Opponents, for their part, referred to the referendum as a "leap in the dark" and warned citizens about "the cost of extra power hungry politicians, the impact on jobs, pensions and public services, and the specter of power being taken away from local authorities" (Dinwoodie, June 21, 1997). The leader of the Tory party painted a similarly dark picture:

> Devolution will unleash wild expectations, followed by disappointment and years of tension between Westminster and Edinburgh . . . A Scottish Parliament would be a long term let-down, marked not by action but by frustration

as another layer of politicians and bureaucrats interfered in the affairs of the Scots and ran up a bill which the Scottish people would have to foot. (Donegan, June 28, 1997)

Indeed, in the final days of the campaign, opponents made an analogy between the threat posed by a devolved parliament and that posed by Hitler ("Like Churchill before the last war we see the terrible dangers ahead—and we give warning").

The extreme rhetoric was not limited to arguments about the future of the union. The leader of the opposition warned that the creation of a tax-raising parliament would "destroy jobs, drive away investment, make Scotland poorer, and strike at the heart of United Kingdom" (Buxton, September 10, 1997). He added, "The tartan tax will institutionalize in one part of the UK a permanent competitive disadvantage. Don't be fooled by the promises; as sure as night follows day, a Scottish parliament will increase taxes" (Macaskill & Donegan, 1997). Proponents of devolution countered with arguments that were at least as strong. The Devolution Minister proclaimed, "There is no way that the Scottish business community will ever be placed at a competitive disadvantage to that in England and Wales as a result of devolution. We have committed ourselves to a level playing field" (Mackenna & Harrington, 1997).

Summary of Case Studies

Elite rhetoric dominated the political environments within which ordinary citizens made decisions on the two preceding policy questions, one arising in the mid-1850s, the other in the late 1990s. A central feature of this rhetoric was heavy reliance on predictions, sometimes implicit, about the effects of competing policies. These predictions, which proliferated over time, emphasized negative outcomes more than positive ones and were typically extreme—often portraying drastic harm. Ironically, most of the rhetorical predictions were presented as certainties, yet almost all suffered from an utter lack of supportive evidence. But that is the point: Uncertainty opens the door to predictions; it also closes the door to concrete evidence.

The case studies, assuming they can be generalized, reveal clearly that politicians make predictions to form and change citizens' beliefs and to provoke fear, anger, and other strong feelings. They also show that neither politicians nor the media seem to provide citizens with reliable, readily identified cues to help distinguish those that are worth taking seriously from those that are just hot air. Under such circumstances, what can we reasonably expect from citizens who are asked to render political judgments?

SPECULATIONS ON CITIZENS' RESPONSES TO POLITICAL RHETORIC

To address citizens' responses to predictive rhetoric, we first comment on two important perspectives in political psychology that appear to suggest grounds for expecting quite competent performance. We then proceed to an admittedly speculative account of the processes that we would expect citizens to use, and reflect on their reliability.

One optimistic view is that citizens can essentially ignore predictive arguments. The political heuristics school says that citizens use informational crutches, especially simple source and value-framing cues such as party and ideology, and thus avoid the need to evaluate actual arguments about policies (Hall, Goren, Chaiken, & Todorov, Chapter 4; Lupia & McCubbins, 1998; Popkin, 1991; Sniderman, 2000). Such cue taking represents a workable form of decision making for those who have strong enough partisan loyalties that they are satisfied simply to put all their trust in party leaders.

Cue-taking obviously cannot work, however, for the large group of citizens whom we have called the nonaligned–those not firmly or generally aligned with either side in a policy debate. The heuristics perspective thus fails to explain the choices of many citizens. Moreover, because movement of the nonaligned in one direction or the other often determines majority opinion on major policy debates, this view cannot account for collective decisions—which side wins and which loses—in those debates.

The other optimistic perspective, "affective intelligence," is based on emotion and political learning (Marcus, Neuman, & MacKuen, 2000). Its advocates argue that when citizens confront something threatening or unexpected in the environment, they become anxious. This anxiety drives them to learn, including by gathering additional information. In the end, heightened anxiety leads to more attentive and informed decision making, thus the term "affective intelligence."

In important respects, however, this analysis does not seem to apply to the situation of citizens facing rhetorical predictions about policy. One can reasonably suppose that extreme and contradictory predictions lead many citizens to become anxious and pay closer attention to a policy debate. But it is not clear that the greater attention can lead to effective learning. The debates will not feature reliable diagnostic information on the validity of the predictions. Citizens may find themselves bombarded with equally frightening, contradictory predictions from the opposing sides, with no useful strategy for deciding which ones to believe.

The outstanding question is this: *how do people form beliefs and respond to predictive rhetoric when partisan or ideological cues do not suffice and when*

diagnostic evidence is not readily available? Our attempt to answer this question is admittedly, at this stage, more a matter of theoretical speculation than of hard evidence.

Outcomes and Causal Linkages

We argued earlier that party leaders use predictions to accomplish two objectives: to lead citizens to believe one thing and not another and to evoke emotional reactions in them. Two aspects of a predictive argument should be crucial in this regard. To simplify our discussion of them, we initially assume the existence of a single party.

The first important aspect of a prediction is its *outcome*, that is, the change (or lack of change) in some important condition that the prediction forecasts. For the prediction to work, the outcome must be sufficiently salient to the unaligned citizen to generate an emotional reaction from him or her (Schwartz & Clore, 1983, 1988). A prediction will shape collective preferences only when a sizeable majority of unaligned citizens react emotionally to the outcome that it concerns.

Most commentary on political rhetoric stops here (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000). In effect, authors assume that the emotionally-salient outcomes operate essentially independently, that the effect of politician's rhetoric depends solely on how strongly citizens feel about the outcome. Logically, another factor must come into play.

The second crucial aspect of a predictive argument is the asserted *causal linkage* between the focal policy (either the status quo or a proposal for change) and the outcome, or, in other words, the belief that the prediction seeks to create. The link is generally that the policy will cause, prevent, avoid, or lead to the outcome: "Reinstating capital punishment will result in the deaths of innocent victims"; "The Clinton health plan will create a huge bureaucracy"; "Without the tax cut, we'll have an economic Dunkirk."[7] A prediction ultimately will not affect people's preferences if they do not in some sense accept the link between the focal policy and the outcome. That acceptance may not amount to a fully conscious, explicit belief that the link is valid. But those who reject or discount the link likely will not react to the prediction, or at least will not do so in a powerful way.

For people with strong ideological orientations, ideology will often determine whether they accept the link that a party's leaders try to make. Strong conservatives expect almost any government action to hurt the economy;

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[7] Even if an argument does not make a prediction, it will still link a policy to a target, for example, by portraying the policy as belonging to a target category: "Affirmative action is a racist policy."

they should be prone to believe almost any alleged link between a specific government action and a specific harm. Strong liberals expect government to promote prosperity and equality and should believe politicians' efforts to link government actions with desirable outcomes.

For the non-ideological or ideologically moderate, however, the plausibility of the asserted link should matter greatly. Here we part company with Riker (1990, pp. 58–63), who flatly dismisses the importance of plausibility, arguing that citizens do not evaluate predictive claims critically and in any event lack the expertise to do so competently. This view overlooks a significant role for citizens' perceptions of the validity of the asserted linkages.

Consider the following fictitious predictions, which we have concocted by scrambling the focal policies and predicted outcomes in some otherwise realistic examples: "Capital punishment will create a huge bureaucracy"; "Without the tax cut, innocent victims will die"; "Unless the government subsidizes the auto industry, the country will remain vulnerable to terrorist attack." These predictive rhetorical appeals fall flat. The outcomes are certainly potent, but because the links are not believable, the reader or listener, instead of being moved, is merely baffled.

In short, contrary to Riker, the claimed links in predictive rhetorical appeals evidently must pass some test of plausibility, if they are to be effective. Put differently, they must have properties that elicit some form of assent to the relevant belief. Determining the nature of this test is crucial to understanding the uses of predictive rhetoric and its consequences for citizen competence. Unfortunately, we are about to navigate largely uncharted waters.

Citizens' Assessments of Asserted Links in Predictive Arguments

Assuming that citizens care about the outcome, they will consciously or unconsciously consider the claimed link between the focal policy and that outcome. Does an important causal linkage exist? To avoid effort, and lacking expertise in the policy area, citizens will limit their answers to a simple categorical question: Is there a genuine, significant link of the sort claimed, or is the claimed link minimal or nonexistent? Unlike experts, ordinary people generally will not bother with refined distinctions, for example, attempting to distinguish between a very important and a somewhat important link. A simplifying, dichotomous judgment fits with the expectation of low-involvement, peripheral processing that most citizens undertake. As Hall, Goren, Chaiken, and Todorov (Chapter 4) suggest, even voting choices may be more superficial and susceptible to low-involvement heuristic processing than scholars tend to believe.

To avoid being manipulated, unaligned citizens will not take politicians at their word, but rather will try to assess the validity of an alleged link independently. In searching for independent corroboration, they will employ simple heuristics, including the following three in particular.

Schema-based evaluation: First, does the proposed link fit an accessible schema, or story, that the citizen has stored in memory? If political leaders claim that increasing the severity of punishment will deter crime, the majority of citizens who have a readily accessible punishment-deters-crime schema will accept the link.[8] Reliance on schemas is a well-established feature of human judgment and is especially important in predominantly "top-down," peripheral processing (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000).

Example-based evaluation: Second, does the alleged link receive support from readily accessed examples? If a politician in the late 1970s claimed that intervening in a domestic conflict in another country would lead to a protracted, unwinnable war, anyone who had lived through the Vietnam War era probably connected with and accepted the link. By the 1990s many no longer remembered the Vietnam example. By 2009, however, the Iraq War would substitute as a convincing illustration. Psychologists have shown that people rely heavily on prominent examples in mental tasks (Medin, Altom, & Murphy, 1984; Read, 1983; also see Gilovich, 1981). Politicians assume and reinforce this tendency, sometimes invoking seemingly instructive events until the generation that experienced them is dead and buried.

Simulation: Can the citizen easily imagine the process by which a claimed link would work? For example, if the link is that cutting tax rates will increase economic growth, those citizens who can come up with some of the intermediate steps—people will see greater reward and thus make a greater effort—will accept the link. People's use of the simulation heuristic has been found in research on attribution (Kahneman & Tversky, 1982). Significantly, party leaders and other advocates of a policy proposal often will not take time to explain the link, thus leaving citizens to come up with it unassisted.

The availability of any single heuristic supporting the link should normally suffice. People might have a schema for the notion that chemical pesticides cause cancer, even though they do not know a single example of such a chemical and cannot begin to describe the intermediate steps. They might know an example of price controls leading to shortages (say rent

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[8] Some people might have conflicting schemas: Punishment-deters-crime and, for example, punishment-can-get-out-of-hand. If people retrieve conflicting schemas, they might dismiss the link or, alternatively, think more deeply.

control, for New Yorkers), without having a general schema or understanding of the mechanism. And they might be able to simulate the process by which free vaccinations would reduce the cost of medical care without having a schema for that effect or awareness of any example. In each case, people find the corroboration they need.

For the most part, one or both of two sources will provide the information underlying the schemas, examples, and simulations: everyday life and recent, highly salient news stories. People's abilities to make links relevant to international conflict might come, for example, from experiences with obnoxious neighbors. Some citizens might now readily draw examples, for various kinds of claims, from the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the intelligence failures about weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or the contribution of regulatory failures to the 2008 financial crisis. We suggest that the failure of a heuristic search to turn up adequate corroborating considerations for the claimed link, in the fleeing moments in which the citizen is processing the rhetoric, will lead her to dismiss the alleged link and reject the rhetorical appeal based on it.[9]

If this account of citizens' responses to alleged causal linkages is roughly correct, what does it imply about the quality of their collective preferences about policy? There are two major considerations. First, how accurately are citizens' emotional responses to the predicted outcomes tuned to their settled and considered preferences regarding the relevant conditions? If a citizen reacts strongly to the claim, "federal policies are destroying the family farm," is it necessarily so that she has a strong, stable preference for maintaining small farms? This important question lies entirely beyond the scope of this chapter.

Second, how do citizens' assessments of the claimed links compare with informed views about the effects of policies? We expect these assessments to be unreliable and potentially misleading in two respects. To begin with, the division of claimed links into a simple dichotomy of real effects versus unreal or insignificant ones casts aside important differences of probability

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[9] A few caveats, however, are in order: We do not suggest that accepting the belief proposed by a predictive argument necessarily means taking it to be literally true—no matter how inflated or bombastic the claims. Nor does it necessarily mean translating the claim into a measured, operational statement of the likely consequences. Acceptance is likely to mean treating the message, especially its emotional and practical meaning, as essentially valid. Indeed, we do not suggest that the citizen necessarily reaches a conclusion about it consciously. If corroborating information is highly accessible, he may not even be aware of undertaking an evaluation. He will just react to the target as if it is indeed at stake in the manner claimed.

and magnitude. Suppose, for example, that a citizen encounters the prediction that a proposed policy "will risk needless deaths." A dichotomous assessment will make no distinction between, say, a 10 percent chance of 100 deaths and a 1 percent chance of 10 deaths. Despite the 100-fold difference in the two risks, generating considerations to support either sort of risk might seem to corroborate the predicted threat and produce essentially the same response. In short, dichotomous assessments of broadly worded, emotional-laden predictions will result in crude responses to real stakes.

More fundamentally, however, finding corroboration in schemas, examples, and simulations, often in the virtually complete absence of any domain-specific knowledge, gives powerful advantages to certain predictions, and disadvantages to others, for reasons that have little to do with their actual merit. Alleged links that fit widely held schemas—corporations exploit, severe punishment deters crime—should produce a strong response. Causal links that require considerable explanation for ordinary citizens, however valid, will appear suspect and be readily dismissed. The citizen's reactions will be along the lines, "If that will really happen, why don't I know it?"

Partisan Competition, Partisan Loyalists, and the Unaligned

The preceding discussion assumed a single party. Even then, we concluded that rhetorical predictions about the consequences of policies create obstacles for citizens who seek to make reasonable decisions. These obstacles undoubtedly increase exponentially when two parties make opposing predictions, or unrelated predictions with opposing policy implications. The number and severity of predictions may escalate in a rhetorical arms race.

The preceding discussion also focused on the unaligned with respect to party and ideology. But what about those who identify strongly with one party or ideology and simply accept that side's predictive rhetoric as truth? Do they reach better judgments, in some sense, or use a preferable mental process to reach those judgments? Clearly, the process they use leaves them confident of the correctness of their beliefs, resolute in their policy preferences, and relatively eager to promote those preferences through voting and other forms of participation. It also leaves them relatively alienated from politicians and even citizens on the other side of the great partisan-ideological divide. From our perspective, however, the main point about these citizens is that, by accepting partisan claims automatically, they take into account no actual information about the policies at stake in a given debate. Such decision making does nothing to support an expectation of competence or intelligence in collective decisions about policies.

CONCLUSION

In this very exploratory chapter, we have considered the political logic of policy rhetoric; the prominence of appeals that rely on extreme and mostly negative predictions and seek to elicit an emotional response; the processes that citizens use in determining their response; and the consequences of those processes for the competence of individual and collective decisions about policy. To put our findings simply, the information environment in which citizens make decisions about policies presents a constant stream of dramatic, emotionally salient predictive claims, covering a wide range of outcomes, and presented largely without supporting evidence or other diagnostic information. The highly partisan cope with this constant stream by adopting the party line. The unaligned have no such luxury, and thus must try to make sense of the political rhetoric. Sometimes the dire predictions elicit some form of corroborating information—a pertinent schema, an example from daily life, or the like—in the minds of these citizens, thus ringing a bell with them. There is little reason to suppose that the predictive appeals that ring a bell in this way correspond at all closely to the considerations that would prove decisive in an environment that encouraged deliberate judgment on the basis of realistic claims and the best available diagnostic information. But, then, there is no reason to believe that taking party cues does, either.

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