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ATTITUDES, NONATTITUDES,
MEASUREMENT ERROR, AND CHANGE

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A Consistency Theory of Public Opinion and Political Choice: The Hypothesis of Menu Dependence

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IN THE END WE study the attitudes of citizens to understand the choices they make as citizens—the candidates they choose to vote for, the public policies they choose to support. Here we want to draw together some arguments that have run through this book, together with some that have been carried on outside it, to outline a general account of political choice.

The spine of this account is the concept of consistency. As with many social science terms, the concept of consistency is inconsistently used. In the context of research on public opinion and political choice, a trio of meanings can be distinguished. Consistency can be a synonym for constraint. Construed as constraint, consistency indexes the predictability of citizens' position on one issue given their positions on another.[1] Then again, consistency can be a synonym for stability. Construed as stability, consistency indexes the predictability of citizens' positions on an issue at one point in time given their positions on the same issue at an earlier point in time. Finally, consistency can be a synonym for congruence. Construed as congruence, consistency indexes the predictability of positions citizens take on specific issues given their general political orientations.[2]

Empirically, this trio—constraint, stability, congruence—is broadly related. The more tightly constrained citizens' positions across issues, the more stable their positions are likely to be over time; and the more stable and tightly constrained their positions, the more likely they are to be congruent with underlying basic orientations. The premise of the theory we present is thus that the first two senses of consistency are causally parasitic on the third. Positions tend to be constrained across issues or stable over time to the extent they are congruent with basic political orientations. And just so far as citizens possess basic political orientations together with the competence to call them into play, a consistency theory of public opinion has a causal leg to stand on.

But a consistency theory of public opinion that has just one leg has long appeared too wobbly to stand, special circumstances aside.[3] The dominant themes of two generations of research have been that citizens tend to be

muddle-headed (the lack of constraint theme), empty-headed (the non-attitudes theme), or both. True, a strong qualifying note also has been sounded. Citizens can pull their ideas together conditional on political sophistication: the more of the latter, the more of the former.[4] But there has seemed no way to get consistency of choice, defined as congruence, out of the largest part of the public: they pay too little attention to politics, know too little about it, and invest too little in organizing their ideas about it.

We therefore want to point to a new conceptual path. It is necessary, we will suggest, first to take account of the characteristics of choices that citizens face, and then to attend to their characteristics as choosers. In politics, citizens characteristically are presented with an organized set, or menu, of choices.[5] The choices they make are dependent on the organization of this menu. Specifically, citizens are in a position to make coherent choices just so far as this menu is coherent. The distinctive feature of the consistency theory that we present is thus that it stands on two causal legs. It posits that consistency, understood as congruence, is *jointly* conditional on the characteristics of citizens as choosers and the menu of options they face as citizens.

Admittedly, in proposing any version of a consistency theory, we are making an uphill argument. A principal theme of half a century of public opinion research has been precisely the comparative absence of consistency in public opinion. Indeed, under the headings of nonattitudes and ambivalence, the lability of choices is a surface motif of many of the chapters of this book. And yet, so far as the studies in this book seek to give a causal analysis of the public's beliefs and choices that goes beyond a nonattitudes story, they are committed to a consistency account of some variety. So, by way of concluding commentary, it seems worthwhile to consider what the premises of such an account most plausibly are.

The most vital premise is this: in representative democracies citizens do not directly choose the alternatives. They only get to choose from among the alternatives on the menu of choices presented to them. That menu is simplified, coordinated, and advocated above all through electoral competition between political parties. Accordingly, we claim that citizens in representative democracies can coordinate their responses to political choices insofar as the choices themselves are coordinated by political parties.

To put our cards on the table at the start, the evidence backing our claim is patchy at best. This is partly because the claim has not yet been the object of systematic study and partly because this kind of claim is inherently difficult to study systematically.[6] Our consideration of previous research is therefore frankly opportunistic. Still, if future work shows that we were on the right track, we may be forgiven for giving our argument a speculative shove here and there.

We assume that people are motivated to be consistent in their beliefs and sentiments about politics, just as they are in their beliefs and senti-

ments about other areas of their lives.[7] The question is: how do they manage to achieve consistency in politics, to the extent they actually achieve it? By what means, given a set of alternatives, do they select one congruent with their general political orientations? How, for that matter, do they form general political orientations given the limited attention they pay to politics and public affairs?

We proceed in three steps. Our first step is to review critically the principal consistency-generating mechanisms so far proposed. They are part of an answer—but only as part of a broader perspective. Our second step is to outline this broader perspective. A substantial part of the public is able to achieve consistency in their political choices, we will suggest, just because their choices are menu dependent. Finally, given the speculative character of our account, our third step is to elaborate on some especially obvious qualifications.

ESTABLISHED MECHANISMS

How, so far as citizens are consistent in their political choices, do they manage to achieve consistency? There is no shortage of answers. By our count, four are commonly given: on-line tallies, group affect, basic values and political orientations, and judgmental heuristics.[8] Four mechanisms may seem three too many. But each can do solid work. The difficulty, we will suggest, is that even when taken together, they cannot do the necessary explanatory job.

Taking the quartet of explanatory mechanisms in order of explanatory reach, we start with the so-called Stony Brook account of motivated reasoning and on-line impression formation.[9] Lodge and his Stony Brook colleagues have proceeded from a simple intuition. Voters form initial impressions of candidates, stored in memory in the form of feelings (or affect). Exposed to subsequent information, the affective tally of past impressions comes to mind at the same time voters become aware of the affective "tag" attached to the new information. In the process voters update their running tally. Evaluations are thus constructed anew with each addition of new information. But the impact of each new piece of information is predicated on the tally of previous evaluations. So voters tend to take onboard information that confirms their previous view and to reject or discount information at odds with it.

This hypothesis of a running affective tally provides an attractively simple solution to the problem of mental bookkeeping. Citizens need remember only one thing. And the one thing they need to remember is easy to remember. To respond consistently to new information, voters need only know how they feel about a candidate. They need not be aware of—indeed, they

probably do not remember—the specific reasons that led them to feel as they do.

The on-line model is welcome on another ground. It calls attention to the pivotal role of affect in the maintenance of cognitive consistency. This is a point of some importance. A distinction between cognition and affect, though well-advised for understanding some problems, is ill-advised for understanding the organization of political belief systems. Many beliefs cannot be genuinely held unless the sentiments appropriate to them are also held. In politics, this entanglement of cognition and affect is inescapable and useful. From one angle, what holds a structure of beliefs together, what makes it cohere, is precisely its affective consistency.

Yet the on-line model is cramped. The fully worked-out version of the model to date gives an account only of congruence narrowly defined—the accumulation of evaluations of political objects, one by one. To give an account of consistency of political choices over sets of choices (say, an array of social welfare policies), a consistency-generating mechanism of wider scope is required. In their most recent work, Taber, Lodge and Glathar propose "node-link *structures*" as a candidate mechanism.[10] But at this stage of their research it is not clear how much the invocation of structure explains and how much it assumes.

A second consistency-generating mechanism is predicated on the simultaneous role of social groups as objects of public opinion and public policy. In his seminal essay, Converse picked out the politics of race as one of two exceptions to the general rule of minimal constraint in mass belief systems. By way of argument, he first listed a series of public policies targeting blacks—for example, to provide job training, to increase educational opportunity, and to monitor discrimination in housing. Ordinary citizens, he then suggested, need not have detailed knowledge of these policies in order to respond consistently to them. They need only know how they feel about blacks.[11] The more they like and sympathize with black Americans, the more likely they will be to support these policies; the more they dislike and feel superior to black Americans, the more likely they will be to oppose these policies.

On this view, citizens maximize congruence between policy alternatives and affect toward social groups that are the objects of these policies. They thus can mount a coherent response to a set of policies serially, responding independently to each policy. Moreover, the politics of race are not idiosyncratic, but only an especially vivid illustration of the general principle that political choices are organized around social groups or around the connections between social groups and political parties. As the authors of *The American Voter* noted long ago, citizens can go a long way in putting together a *politically* coherent set of beliefs by knowing that labor unions, for example, are specially tied to the Democratic Party, while big business

is specially tied to the Republican Party. Indeed, knowing of alliances between salient social groups and political parties, together with having pronounced feelings about them, can amount to "ideology by proxy," in the telling phrase of Campbell and his colleagues (Campbell et al. 1960).

It certainly is possible to extract a consistency story out of group likes and dislikes that is consistent with the intermittent attention ordinary citizens pay to politics. And perhaps this is the path to take. Still, we have reservations. The issue of race aside, there is not a large amount of evidence that choices over political issues are based on a group calculus. Moreover, to get consistency of choice over sets of policies dealing with diverse groups, it is necessary to rely on a premise that feelings across groups are consistently organized—and that premise is not plausible for large portions of the public.[12] In any case, what is doing the real work in generating political coherence is knowledge of partisan coalitions. Absent knowing, for example, that labor unions are allied with the Democratic Party and big business with the Republican Party, there is no basis for ideology by proxy.

A third consistency-generating mechanism, *core values,* is appealing on the grounds of both explanatory scope and simplicity. On the one side, it is not difficult to see how foundational values like liberty and equality can ground choices over large sets of specific issues. On the other side, since the number of foundational values (as compared to opinions) is small, it is not difficult to see how ordinary citizens can organize them coherently. So on both counts an account of consistency is conceivable, with citizens selecting the alternative, from among those on offer, that is most congruent with their core values.

Feldman has, more than anyone, given empirical support to the hypothesis of core values coordinating policy choices. In pioneering work, he developed candidate measures of a triad of core values—egalitarianism, economic individualism, and support for free enterprise.[13] In subsequent work with Steenbergen, Feldman has shifted focus to humanitarianism as a core value, a shift we find appealing because of its fit with recent normative rethinking of equality as an ideal of humanitarianism.

Intuitively, the appeal to core values as consistency generators is attractive. It meshes smoothly with the language in which political thinkers conceive political choices without requiring unreasonable assumptions about the capacity of ordinary citizens to be political thinkers. And empirically, it surely must be true that issue choices are grounded to a degree in basic values.

The problem is that it appears to be true only to a limited degree. If the empirical benchmark of congruence is the power of measures of core values to predict specific political choices, the conclusion to draw is that congruence is modest at most. Of course, the problem may not lie with the hypothesis of core values as consistency generators. As plausibly, the problem may be the limitation of current measures to gauge adherence to core

values. Measurement of core values is still in an early stage. Methodologically, it has concentrated almost entirely on the rating of values.[14] This may prove the best approach in the end, though Jacoby has recently introduced an innovative approach involving the ranking of values.[15] Future development of ranking techniques, or indeed of rating ones, may show that substantial numbers of ordinary citizens choose among political alternatives by selecting the one most congruent with their core values. But if that is the right lesson to draw, this is not the right time to draw it.

The last set of consistency-generating mechanisms is heuristics, that is, judgmental shortcuts. The intuition here is that even comparatively well-informed citizens have a limited amount of information to work with. If they are to be able to make politically coherent judgments they need an easy-to-operate calculus. Judgmental shortcuts would seem to fit the bill.

Consider the likability heuristic introduced by Brady and Sniderman.[16] The specific task is locating the positions of strategic actors in a political landscape. Although some are concrete and immediate—men and women, for example—others are more abstract and removed—liberals and conservatives, for example. How, then, are citizens able to define correctly what liberals and conservatives stand for—that is, accurately describe their positions over an array of issues—even though they cannot accurately define liberalism and conservatism?

By following a judgmental shortcut, Brady and Sniderman suggest. To estimate *accurately* the issue commitments of any pair of competing groups, it is necessary only for citizens to know their stand on the issue and to take into account the difference in their feelings toward the two groups. So, even without knowing what liberalism and conservatism are as ideologies, citizens can know what liberals and conservatives stand for. Notice, given our interest in consistency, the qualifying condition. The heuristic only works to the degree that an individual likes one side and dislikes the other. If they do not recognize that liking liberals entails disliking conservatives, the likability heuristic fails.

The hypothesis of heuristics is frequently invoked.[17] It seems to provide a method of explaining how citizens can compensate for the limited information they have about political affairs. It is worth making plain why this way of putting things is misleading, for it throws light on a neglected problem.

It is true in one sense, but false in another, that citizens can compensate for limited information by taking advantage of a heuristic. The sense in which it is true is that even comparatively well-informed citizens are unlikely to have all the information at hand to reason through an informed decision. The sense in which it is false is that the likelihood of taking advantage of an effective judgmental shortcut itself depends on how well-informed citizens are. It takes smarts to make smart moves, if it is okay to

speak plainly. It accordingly is false to suggest that the public taken as a whole can make judgments about a problem in public affairs by taking advantage of heuristics that match the judgments they would make if they were to be fully informed about it. It is only true that the better informed they are, the less they are likely to be handicapped by their absolute lack of knowledge.

The efficacy of judgmental shortcuts as a consistency mechanism is heavily conditional on political sophistication. And so, a stream of studies make plain, are the other consistency-generating mechanisms. One exception aside, it is the politically more sophisticated who benefit more from each of these mechanisms, that is, who choose more consistently in virtue of them. That applies to judgmental shortcuts like the likability heuristic, core values, and basic political orientations, and even to on-line processing, which was initially commended precisely for its simplicity of operation.[18]

How, then, should the explanatory books be balanced? On the profit side of the ledger, we have gotten better and better at giving an account of how citizens make political choices the more politically sophisticated they are. On the loss side of the ledger, however, we have gotten worse and worse at giving an account of how citizens make political choices the less sophisticated they are. Since there is not an excess of the former and no shortage of the latter, this is explanatory progress of an ironic stripe. It may be useful, therefore, to approach the problem of consistency from a different perspective.

MENU DEPENDENCE: POLICY AGENDAS, ISSUE FRAMING, AND ISSUE CENTRALITY

The capacity of citizens to make consistent choices, we shall suggest, is contingent on the organization of the menu of choices presented to them. We shall explore three aspects of menu dependence for facilitating consistency of choices: first, menu dependence over sets of issues; second, for issues taken one at a time; third, for variation in consistency across issues.

We start with policy agendas. To ask how citizens manage to achieve a consistent response not merely to issues one by one but to whole sets of them assumes that a substantial part of the public is in fact capable of doing so. But in order to demonstrate that this assumption of consistency is in fact warranted, it is necessary to know with respect to what they are striving to be consistent.

What might an answer look like? To the extent citizens respond to issues separately, evaluating each on the basis of considerations unique to it, then consistency understood either as constraint or congruence is ruled out. A specific issue, just by virtue of being specific, points to a particular matter—

whether the government should increase unemployment assistance, for example, or whether it should ramp up job-training programs. And when making choices about particular matters, citizens must be able to rely on a more general view of the matter if they are to make consistent choices across issues. But what might their general view of the matter consist in? On the one side, it cannot be something as general as an ideological orientation, since that is something so general as to be out of the reach of most citizens. On the other side, it cannot be something so specific as their feelings about particular social groups, since that is not general enough. Something in between is needed, and that something, we suggest, is a policy agenda.

To illustrate what we mean by a policy agenda, we draw on the research of Carmines and Layman. Analyzing a series of National Election Surveys, they pick out a three-dimensional structure of policy preferences. One dimension is defined by issues like government support for jobs and standard of living; a second, by issues like abortion and women's rights; a third, by issues like government help for blacks and spending on programs for blacks.[19] Each attitudinal dimension thus maps on to a policy agenda. Carmines and Layman accordingly label the first the social welfare agenda; the second, the cultural agenda; the third, the racial agenda. Our concern is not whether there are three agendas or two—or four, for that matter. For our purposes, Carmines and Layman's issue analysis makes two points worth emphasizing, one negative, the other positive. The negative point is that the ideas of ordinary citizens tend to be unrelated *across* policy agendas. The positive point is that they tend to be consistent *within* them.

This distinction between consistency within and across policy agendas is pivotal. The classical studies of ideology in mass publics proceeded on the premise that the menu of issue choices has no structure, that it is not divided into distinct parts. So they took as a test of ideological thinking consistency—defined as constraint—across the full spectrum of contemporary concerns, ignoring demarcation of issues into distinct sets.[20] In turn, they drew the lesson that ordinary citizens cannot take in liberalism-conservatism as a coherent whole.

But it does not follow that because the public as a whole cannot take in liberalism-conservatism as a whole, it cannot take in their component parts coherently. Each policy agenda—social welfare, cultural, and racial—captures a component of the ideological divide in contemporary American politics. But each represents a distinct component, with each having concerns that mark it off from the others, in elite as well popular discourse. And accordingly it is perfectly possible, indeed commonly the case as Carmines and Layman's results indicate, that citizens can be liberal (or conservative) with respect to issues like abortion or women's rights without being liberal (or conservative) with respect to issues of government assistance for

the poor or for those in search of jobs. Carmines and Layman's results thus underscore two points: first, that the three policy agendas are distinct in the mind of the public; and second, that each of the agendas is sufficiently bite-sized to be taken in as a coherent whole by the public as a whole. Ordinary citizens thus tend to be consistently liberal (or conservative) agenda by agenda in spite of not being consistently liberal (or conservative) across agendas.

Now think of the overall view that ordinary citizens form about a policy agenda as a latent trait—in our parlance, their general view of the matter. How do citizens go about choosing among alternatives for an issue on a particular agenda? By consulting their general view of that agenda. Just so far as their general view of the cultural agenda is conservative, they will consistently choose the conservative alternative across issues on that agenda. And just so far as their general view is liberal, they will consistently choose the liberal alternative. In this way the public as a whole, and not just the most sophisticated segment of it, can make consistently liberal and conservative choices agenda by agenda even though they cannot make consistently liberal and conservative choices across agendas.

But how do issues come to be bundled together as they are? Why do policy agendas include some issues but not others? And, still more difficult, how do some citizens achieve consistency not only within policy agendas but also between them?

Part of the answer of how consistency is achieved across agendas is well established. One characteristic of citizens as choosers, their level of political sophistication, plays a crucial role. More exactly, a double role. Political awareness facilitates consistency by facilitating a coherent set of core beliefs and expectations, generalized priors if you like, on which to base a specific choice. Additionally, political sophistication promotes consistency by facilitating recognition of the relevance of these core beliefs and expectations in making specific issue choices.[21] To this harmony of views we would add just one discordant note. As we read the research literature, the emphasis is on individuals as active information processors, imposing order and coherence on what otherwise would be, in James's enduring phrase, a blooming buzzing confusion.[22] By contrast, consistent with our view on the external organization of choice spaces, we propose that political sophistication facilitates the more modest task of recognizing rather than imposing coherence.

And that coherence is imposed, we suggest, through competition between political parties and candidates for control of government. Partly because of the commitments of their core members and partly because of their strategic alliances with interest groups, parties compete against each other agenda by agenda. And very largely because of the dynamics of electoral competition they yoke agenda to agenda.

For evidence, indirect as it is, we rely on a recent study by Layman and Carsey (2002). They show that the link between the social welfare and cultural agendas is conditional on strength of party identification and awareness of partisan differences on the two agendas. For those identifying strongly with a party and aware of the differences between them on the two agendas there is a strong link; for those identifying with a party but not aware of the differences between them on the two agendas, there is only a moderate link; for those who do not identify with a party whether or not they are aware of differences between the parties there is essentially no link.

Consider the implications of Layman and Carsey's findings. A consistency theory of substantial scope has appeared a nonstarter because there has appeared to be no way to get coherence of choice out of citizens themselves. But the consistency-generating mechanisms, their findings suggest, are institutional. Political parties provide the basis for the consistency of individuals; indeed, twice over on Layman and Carsey's results: once through the consequences of attachment to parties and once through the consequences of knowing parties' contrasting positions on issues.[23] This double role of parties testifies to the institutional organization of political choices. By facilitating consistency across policy agendas, parties help the substantial part of the public attached to them to make choices across the spectrum of contested issues on the basis of a consistently liberal or conservative view of the matter.

On our view, it is parties and candidates that do the heavy lifting necessary for consistency in public opinion. They reduce the number of alternatives open to choice to only a few—indeed, frequently to only two. They portray those alternatives as competing courses of action. The implication is that rejecting one means accepting the other. They stamp a partisan and ideological brand on the arguments offered in their favor, signaling that accepting one means rejecting the other. Political candidates, by assuming the lead of a party, can do much to determine how issues are organized into policy agendas or even how policy agendas are organized into overarching ideological orientations.[24] But at the end of the day, it is through parties that the menu of choices on offer to citizens is organized.

And much to the advantage of citizens. By structuring political choice spaces, parties facilitate citizens' reasoning consistently from basic principles. It is not possible to derive a stable and coherent structure of choices the other way around, from the power of ordinary citizens to reason about politics. Coherence at the level of individual citizens is conditional on coherence in the menu of choices presented to them to make as citizens.

The role of political parties in bundling issues into bite-sized agendas promotes consistency both within and across sets, or agendas, of issues. But parties also promote consistency issue by issue. Consider the framing and highlighting of issues. Sniderman and Theriault (chapter 5 in this vol-

ume) investigate efforts to frame or define "the essence of the problem" for an issue, that is, to make a persuasive case as to "how it should be thought about and . . . [to] recommend what (if anything) should be done."[25] They show that when respondents are confronted with competing efforts to frame an issue, rather than being confused, they are markedly more likely to select the policy alternative congruent with their general view of the matter. They embed this result in a larger story about the connection between electoral competition and electoral choice. It is just so far as parties and candidates compete over issues, they suggest, that voters are in a position to make consistent choices.

Sniderman and Theriault present their story as one about the electorate as a whole, not just the upper echelon of the politically sophisticated part of it. Indeed, in their analysis, they show that their findings hold for both less sophisticated and more sophisticated citizens. Both are more likely to choose, from among the alternatives on offer, the one most congruent with their general view of the matter when they are exposed to competing efforts to frame an issue.

This result is important in its own right, illustrating as it does how citizens can more accurately find their political bearings thanks to the clash of competing arguments. But there is an aspect of Sniderman and Theriault's results that they do not explore and that we want to call attention to here.

In one of their experiments, the effect of being exposed to arguments on both sides of an issue is conditional on the respondents' level of political awareness. Finding that political sophistication makes a difference is a standard result. But in one of their experiments, Sniderman and Theriault find the opposite of what is standardly found. Instead of finding that congruence increases as political information increases, they find that the less politically aware, not the more, benefit most from exposure to competing ways of thinking about a political issue.

As things stand, only two on-the-shelf explanations do better at accounting for the choices of the less politically sophisticated than of the more sophisticated. In the contemporary version of the nonattitudes model, the decisive consideration is the extent to which people have an approximately evenly balanced set of reasons to support or oppose a policy.[26] This certainly counts as explanation, but there is no way to extract a consistency-based account from a nonattitudes model, since the pivotal factor is precisely the extent to which people's views about an issue are inconsistent.

The second on-the-shelf account centers on group affect. It can plausibly be argued that the less politically sophisticated citizens are, the more likely they are to lack a cognitive basis for making political choices, and therefore the more likely they are to rely on an affective one. There is some evidence this is so, though less than one may think.[27] Sniderman and Theriault point to a third alternative for giving an account of the choices of the less polit-

ically aware portion of the public. It is a fact, and an important one, that they are less adept at organizing their choices just by virtue of being less aware. But so far as they can choose consistently, some external machinery for organizing their responses is specially needed. Sniderman and Theriault suggest that electoral competition supplies this machinery. Admittedly, an inverse relationship between consistency of choice and level of political sophistication holds for only one of their two experiments. So we would therefore like to pitch their results at a slightly lower level. What their results show, and not just in one of the experiments but in both, is that the less sophisticated benefit at least as much as the more sophisticated from being exposed to the clash of opposing arguments. And it is electoral competition that generates the clash of arguments.

Issue-framing effects of all varieties are illustrations of menu dependence. But they are only a selection of the ways in which menu dependence is driven by the dynamics of electoral competition. Consider differences in the partisan centrality of issues. There are issues that parties do not wish to compete on; there are others that, out of a calculation of political advantage or as a consequence of political conviction, they do wish to compete on. Political issues can accordingly be located along a continuum of partisan centrality, from those most vigorously contested to those least vigorously contested.

In broad outline, the following hypothesis is worth examination. The more central an issue is to electoral competition, the greater the effort that political actors, including political parties, will make to call the electorate's attention to them and to contrast the alternatives open for choice. The more peripheral an issue, the less attention directed to it, and the more similar the alternatives open for choice will appear. Moreover, the more central an issue is to electoral competition, the "stickier" will be the identification of issues with parties over time; the more peripheral the issue, the looser the linkage. The result: the more central the issue to partisan competition, the stronger the tendency to congruence; the more peripheral the issue, the weaker.

And what follows from this? Very briefly, the relevance of alternative public opinion models varies with the partisan centrality of a political choice. Consistency and contestation go hand in hand. The more central an issue is to electoral competition, the more likely it is that causal accounts favoring opinion consistency, whether in the form of on-line processing or more elaborately hierarchical models, will apply. Conversely, the more peripheral an issue, the more likely it is that models accentuating inconsistency—Converse's black-and-white model, Krosnick's satisficing model, and Zaller's consideration sampling model with an important qualification—will apply.

Impressionistically, this hypothesis fits to a first approximation the standard findings in public opinion research. Consistency (whether inter-

preted in terms of consonance with other beliefs at one moment in time or stability of the same belief over time) seems weakest for issues that are remote from established partisan battlegrounds (e.g., U.S. intervention in Nicaragua) and strongest for those that are central to them (e.g., racial policies). The hypothesis of a connection between partisan centrality and opinion consistency seems to us promising, and offers an example of external anchoring of belief, although of course further research is required to test this hypothesis ex ante as opposed to trawling through previous research ex post.

Some Especially Obvious Qualifications

Much of our argument should be filed under the heading of "Suggestions and Speculations." Apart from issuing this general caution, we want to post some specific warning signs.

The most conspicuous concerns the problem of belief revision. Any theory of choice that is rational under any description of rational must have a provision for updating. External circumstances change, and there must be some way of taking (some of) these changes into account. Yet consistency theories take as their principal premise that what you believe and feel now is conditional on what you believed and felt before; or still more strongly, that in forming a belief or feeling now, you aim at maximizing consistency with what you believed and felt before. But if citizens have been consistency maximizing for any extended period of time, how are they capable of substantially revising their beliefs?

One route to take is to posit an accuracy motive operating in tandem with a consistency motive. On this view, "[P]eople motivated to arrive at a particular conclusion attempt to be rational and to construct a justification of their desired conclusion *that would persuade a dispassionate observer.*"[28] Under some interpretation this surely is right. Still, it is less than reassuring for revising beliefs about politics. For one thing, the notion of a "dispassionate observer" is inherently difficult to pin down just so far as political choices turn on conflicts between incommensurable values. For another, an accuracy motive may work as a self-correcting device for fairly specific motives, for example, maintaining a positive self-evaluation. But once an internally consistent framework of beliefs, feelings, and expectations has been established, how does one stand outside it? Just so far as a framework is internally consistent, it carries with it a self-affirming warrant that this is the way the world really is, as any dispassionate observer would agree. In any case, in the absence of a theoretical basis, appealing to an accuracy motive to override a motivation to consistency is unacceptably ad hoc.

An alternative route to respond to the problem of updating is to take advantage of Bayesian models of political learning.[29] Gerber and Green have put forward a case for unbiased Bayesian updating in the public as a whole.[30] On their interpretation, the case for unbiased learning is cemented by the observation that in the aggregate, citizens identifying with opposing parties revise their prior beliefs by approximately the same amount when confronted by new experiences. This is a comforting outcome. But it is not obvious that accepting Bayesian updating comes at the price of rejecting consistency maximizing. Bartels argues in response that Gerber and Green's central result illustrates partisan bias, not unbiased updating, provided that Bayesianism is properly interpreted. Bartels's interpretation eases the tension between consistency maximizing and updating in the face of new experience (Bartels 2003).

Even so, Bayesian updating and consistency maximizing make an ill-matched couple. The whole thrust of a consistency account is to emphasize the recalcitrance of people to revising their beliefs even in the face of clear evidence that their preconceptions have failed them. And what is worse, this appears to be at least as true for those who have given more thought to a problem, at any rate when it comes to politics. Consider Tetlock's (1999) studies of theory-driven reasoning. He shows that experts cope with the interpretive complexities and ambiguities of world politics by resorting to theory-driven strategies of thinking that allow them to: (1) make confident counterfactual inferences about what would have happened had different policy paths been pursued (plausible pasts); (2) generate predictions about what might yet happen (probable futures); and (3) defend both counterfactual beliefs and conditional forecasts from potentially disconfirming data. For example, experts who were convinced in the late 1980s that the Communist Party of the Soviet Union would continue to control the levers of power in the Kremlin deep into the 1990s argue that this outcome nearly did happen (the attempted coup of August 1991), whereas experts who expected the EU currency convergence project to fail could argue that the project nearly did come undone at several junctures (again, the close-call counterfactual defense) and eventually will still collapse (the just-off-on-timing defense).

The weight of Tetlock's findings is that experts do not come close to living up to the terms of the Bayesian reputational bets they make about the relative likelihood of events. On his view, there are two basic reasons—one rooted in the human mind and the other in the structure of the political environment—why experts find it relatively easy to resist changing their minds when the unexpected occurs. Resistance is easy, in part, because experts come cognitively equipped with a complex of cause-effect schemata that allow them to portray events that were not viewed as likely ex ante as

close to inevitable ex post. Resistance is also easy, in part, because historical data lend themselves to a variety of alternative causal interpretations and it is rarely possible to achieve ideological consensus on how history would have unfolded in counterfactual worlds in which alternative policy paths were pursued. When reality constraints are weak, strongly held preconceptions fill the void.

There is another problem. When it comes to political matters at the center of electoral competition, political sophistication promotes divergence, not convergence, of political choices along partisan and ideological lines. It is not obvious that divergence can be accommodated on Bayesian principles.[31]

Still, consistency maximizing without a provision for updating is a formula for irresponsible voters in a world in which things do change. How can citizens change in response to changing circumstances if they are indeed consistency maximizers?

Framing the problem of change in terms of belief revision (Bayesian or otherwise) presupposes that the question that needs an answer is how citizens on their own hook revise their beliefs in the face of new experience. But the central argument of our project is that there is much that citizens don't do *on their own hook*. Throughout our claim has been that political institutions do the heavy lifting. That is just the point of emphasizing the menu dependence of choice.

And what falls out of this focus on menu dependence is updating via another route. Partisan elites have incentives to keep the menu of basic choices fixed for extended periods of time. But to the extent their continuing hold on political power is put at risk by changing circumstances, they are under pressure to respond. They must introduce new policies or revise old ones. Sometimes they do the one, sometimes the other, sometimes under old labels, sometimes under new ones. The question of updating takes a quite different form so viewed. It is not necessarily the beliefs of citizens that get revised. It is instead the courses of action they get to choose that are revised. And so far as this is true, updating is built into the menu of alternatives on offer to citizens.

Again we think it is useful to distinguish between the characteristics of citizens as choosers and the characteristics of the choices presented to them. Yet drawing distinctions by twos risks supposing that the two are separate, as though some portion of the variance in consistency is to be attributed to characteristics of citizens and a different portion to characteristics of choices. The temptation to pronounce one or the other more fundamental appears nearly irresistible—irresistible and ironic.[32] Thus, students of legislative institutions devote themselves to analysis of the strategic choices of political elites, yet they take electoral preferences to be the most fundamental causal force. Generously reciprocating, students of

mass behavior devote themselves to the investigation of public opinion, yet they take the initiatives of elites to be the most fundamental causal force.[33] It is all the more worthwhile to emphasize that public opinion and elite strategic choice are part of a single account.

Elsewhere we have written about political choice spaces.[34] A choice space is, simply enough, the menu of alternatives on offer. Alternatives are defined by political elites partly by anticipation of electoral preferences, partly by consequences of past commitments. Alternatives are chosen by mass publics partly on the basis of preferences, partly on the basis of aptitudes in connecting preferences to alternatives. Plus, there is a complicating factor on both sides of the equation. Working with just two terms, elite actions and electoral preferences, is working with two terms too few. From time to time, shocks intrude—a slump in the economy, a threat overseas. Elites in office have to respond just because their eyes are on the next election. So they draw on their respective ideologies, broadly liberal or conservative depending on which party they belong to. And apart from the demands of interest group politics, they draw on their ideologies in an effort to take advantage of their best theories of how the world actually works. The whole idea is thus to tie together elite initiatives and citizen responses through the vehicle of a choice space.

Another especially obvious point of qualification: the explanatory limits of our account. We have worked to reduce explanation of choice to the maximization of consistency, where consistency is defined as congruence between selection of a policy alternative and direction of an underlying orientation. Analyzing judgments of the political commitments of strategic political actors, Brady and Sniderman have formalized a consistency model of judgment that derives accuracy of cognitive judgments from basic likes and dislikes, coherently organized.[35] This reduction, focusing on consistency, offers gains. It brings the benefit of parsimony. It facilitates formulation of a formal model cast in maximizing form. And it generates non-obvious predictions.

Still, our account has notable gaps. One illustration will have to do for many. A key question, we remarked, was "With respect to what, exactly, are most citizens trying to be consistent?" The answer, we suggested, was their general orientation toward policy agendas, one at a time. The tone of our account certainly suggests that the organization of policy agendas is the work of political elites. Even to our eyes, this suggestion is muzzy. Political institutions do the immediate work of bundling issues. But the opinions that elites have about the shape of public opinion surely must play some role. If so, how does the process work? To answer that question it will be necessary to detail how particular policy agendas come to be organized by political activists.

There is a more general point. Only after the consistency mainspring is wound do the explanatory clocks of consistency theories start ticking. But of course this involves some fairly heavy question begging. Why do some parts of the public identify with one political party while others identify with its competitor(s), and why are some disposed to a liberal or broadly left political outlook while others are disposed to a conservative or broadly right orientation? How exactly do the major pieces of citizens' political furniture, their basic beliefs and loyalties, come to be acquired? The answers must come from studies of the acquisition of basic political beliefs and allegiances. In this sense our account of political choices is parasitic on accounts of political socialization and learning.

A FINAL WORD

Perhaps quixotically, we want to suggest that the weakest point of our hypothesis of menu dependence may prove its strongest recommendation. When in need of an unseen (explanatory) hand, we point to political institutions, political parties and electoral competition in particular. But invoking institutions presents a special problem of proof. So far as political institutions are responsible for the menu of political choices (as opposed, for example, to exogenous shocks), the basic choices tend to be fixed for extended intervals, often a generation or more. Certainly that seems the case for a political system like the American one. But to say that the menu of basic choices is fixed over time is to say it is a constant. And so far as it is a constant, then how can it be shown to constrain political choice?

We have worried about this problem for some time. Historical accounts aside, we believe the best way forward is through randomized experiments in public opinion surveys. Many features of menu dependence lend themselves to experimental manipulation—the effect of taking polar positions, the party branding of policy alternatives, and the provision of explicit alternatives, among them. This is the road we have started down. We invite others to join us.

NOTES

1. We interpret constraint broadly, referring not only to the connectedness of specific beliefs but also to the connectedness of any set of idea elements at the same

level of specificity. Our usage thus conforms to Peffley and Hurwitz's (1985) concept of horizontal linkage. Accordingly, we often speak of coherence in place of constraint.

2. The notion of congruence corresponds to Peffley and Hurwitz's vertical linkages in belief systems.

3. The two classic exceptions are group-centered politics, where affect—for example, toward blacks—can assure constraint across issues dealing with blacks, and issue publics, where uncommon motivation and focused attention on a specific set of concerns can also do the trick. See Converse 1964.

4. See, for example, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992; and Jackman and Sniderman 2001. It deserves to be emphasized that Converse first sounded this note in his seminal essay, although he qualified this by positing that only a thin slice of the public is sophisticated enough about politics to form politically coherent belief systems.

5. For the concept of menu dependence in economic analysis, see, e.g., Sen 2002.

6. For the principal difficulty, in our view, see our concluding comment on menus as explanatory constants.

7. Festinger 1957.

8. For all the obvious reasons, we omit consideration of ideology, understood as an abstract and integrated outlook on politics.

9. Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1985; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989.

10. Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001:216, italics theirs.

11. Converse 1964.

12. See the discussion below on the connection between affective coherence and levels of political sophistication.

13. Feldman 1988. Feldman has carried this on in an interesting way with humanitarianism—see Feldman and Steenbergen 2001. See also Frankfurt 1988.

14. Robinson, Shaver, and Wrightsman 1999.

15. Specifically, the procedure scores forced choices over all possible pairs of a limited set of basic values. See Jacoby 2002.

16. Brady and Sniderman 1985.

17. E.g., Popkin 1991 and Lupia 1994.

18. For the conditionality of on-line processing on political awareness, see McGraw, Lodge, and Stroh 1990.

19. Carmines and Layman 1997; Shafer and Claggett 1995.

20. Converse 1964, especially Table VII.

21. Converse 1964; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Zaller 1992.

22. E.g., Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001:198.

23. See, specifically, Layman and Carsey 2002:798.

24. For a key argument on the contingent character of issue bundling, see Carmines and Stimson 1989.

25. For a review of previous efforts, see Nelson and Kinder 1996:1057. See also Entman 1993.

26. Zaller 1992.

27. Sniderman, Brody, and Kuklinski 1984.

28. Kunda 1990:482–83, emphasis ours. Contrary to the impression that this point of disagreement may leave, we benefited greatly from Kunda's work. Her analysis on motivated reasoning introduces a very useful distinction between motives for accuracy and for directional goals.

29. See, for example, Achen 1989, 1992; Bartels 2003; Gerber and Green 1998, 1999; Zechman 1979; and Husted, Kenny, and Morton 1995.

30. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002: chap. 5; Gerber and Green 1999, 1998.

31. For the connection between convergence and Bayesian updating, see Bartels 2003; for evidence on the connection between polarization and political sophistication, see Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991.

32. We can attest to the temptation, having succumbed ourselves in earlier efforts. We are especially indebted to James Kuklinski for pointing out to us the error of our ways.

33. Zaller 1992 is the preeminent example.

34. Sniderman 2000; Jackman and Sniderman 2001.

35. It may be worth remarking that the Brady-Sniderman model has the nonintuitive property of generating accurate cognitive judgments about the political commitments of strategic actors (e.g., political parties, liberals and conservatives) from affective orientations to those actors. See Brady and Sniderman 1985.

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