The Democratic Dilemma: Taking the Dilemma out of Democracy

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Lupia and McCubbins (1998), in *The Democratic Dilemma*, wrote with magisterial force and clarity about the broad set of conditions under which voters can make good choices. Citizens with limited information can follow trusted cues to vote in ways that are consistent with their interests. Because effective democratic accountability does not require voters to possess and deploy complete information, the potential dilemma of delegating decision-making authority to political representatives is not as great as we might fear.

Their book is a classic because it joined two important streams of social science into one more-encompassing approach to understanding voter choice: the economic theory of rational ignorance and the cognitive science of how people's brains actually work. By testing deductively derived propositions about the effects of decision-making environments on simulated voters in laboratory settings, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) made a compelling claim that information shortcuts can be consistent with democratic accountability.

As one of the early books in political science to offer a theory of voter choice tested with experimental evidence, *The Democratic Dilemma* presaged the experimental turn that has transformed the discipline. The "gold standard" for strong empirical work has shifted from theoretically grounded observational research to one that approximates randomized, controlled trials in which the putative connections between cause and effect can be clearly identified. The methodological move toward causal identification undoubtedly has injected greater precision in research design in much political science scholarship. But focusing exclusively on what is measurable—typically, voter behavior—runs the risk of overlooking the effects of institutional settings and political actors' strategic behavior that shape voters' choices. This is important because democratic accountability—and the quality of democratic representation—depends on various institutional factors, some of which have been explored in greater detail since Lupia and McCubbins wrote their book. At root is the quality and credibility of messages that political parties are able to send voters about which policies they would implement if elected, which depend on electoral rules and executive–legislative relations at the system level and attributes of electoral districts within any system. For example, political primaries motivate politicians to cater to the intense preference holders in their districts, even more so in gerrymandered districts that create safe seats for one party or another. In this decision-making environment, voters in the general election are offered an impoverished set of choices with undeniable consequences for democratic accountability.

Political science in the twenty-first century has made strides toward causal identification. In the spirit of *The Democratic Dilemma*, it is time to reintegrate institutional context with voter choice, to see a fuller picture of democratic functioning. How can we design research to gauge how the dilemma inherent in delegated democracy is greater in some settings than in others? Do distinct institutional contexts undermine the possibility of successful delegation?

INFORMATION OVERLOAD

As Druckman (2019) observes in his article in this symposium, politically relevant information available to voters has gone from garden-hose to fire-hydrant proportions. Information scarcity is not a problem today, if it ever was.

Many scholars, including Kevin Esterling and Dmitri Landa in this symposium, think imaginatively about how we can capitalize as a society on unprecedented information flows between voters and policy makers. They lay out circumstances in which information can generate better collective choices: policy makers can gain a rich knowledge of voter preferences in virtual town hall meetings, for example, to arrive at better decisions.

However, radically decentralized democracy could run into problems. Condorcet's jury theorem—essentially that "more heads are better than one"—relies on a process of aggregating the independent judgments of multiple people rather than "democratic deliberation" that could skew decisions toward the views of more persuasive, more influential, and more resourced actors (Waddington 2008). The key to accurate bull-weight guessing at the county fair, in the famous 1907 experiment, seems to rest on independent judgment rather than a meeting of the minds.[1]

As Lupia and McCubbins remind us, modern politics often takes place in environments unconducive to independent judgments. People may rely on flawed shortcuts or on information providers who may deliberately or unintentionally promote bias (Druckman, Fein, and Leeper 2012, 441; Lord, Ross, and Lepper 1979; Schwartzberg 2015; Sunstein 2009; Tversky and Kahneman 1974). Glaeser and Sunstein (2014) pointed out that a profusion of balanced information—contrary to the optimistic view that information is democracy's "disinfectant"—may be insufficient to overcome voters' inclination to believe what confirms their previous biases and/or that comports with endorsements of people they trust. For these reasons, information technologies are unlikely to be a panacea for the democratic dilemma.

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Massive information also can undermine verification, one of the key institutional fixes identified by Lupia and McCubbins (1998). To put this in context, consider recent scholarship by Bullock and others (Bullock 2011; Bullock et al. 2015) that suggests American voters use various types of information in addition to party cues in forming their judgments. This should not be surprising given that primaries and other forms of intraparty competition complicate party messaging. Seen in this light, the 2016 victory of Donald Trump could reflect voters' ability to see past establishment cues to grasp their own economic insecurity and act on it (Morgan 2018; Mutz 2018). But this is hardly cause for celebrating the informational foundations of democratic accountability in America, given the precarious truth claims underlying Trump's promises to redress their reasonable fears.

making is unclear. Druckman, Fein, and Leeper (2012, 447) corroborated this point in their consideration of the stability (and usefulness to voters) of information frames over time: competition among dueling factions complicates the understanding of which cues to trust and what they mean.

Normatively, fostering parties to be reliable cue-givers comports with Schattsneider's (1942) suggestion that the essence of democratic accountability is the ability of parties to offer and deliver on competing visions of the public good. Voters lack the time and knowledge to investigate the costs and benefits of every policy, much less think about how their own interests must weigh against those of other citizens. Downsian parties aiming at the political middle foster democratic accountability by considering the long-term consequences of each policy for every other goal or interest.

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Lupia and McCubbins's framework of strategically embedded voter choice should return to the conversation. They pointed us toward an analysis of conditions under which information can deceive (Lupia and McCubbins 1998, 98). People are more likely to believe Trump's promises to protect American workers from foreign competition if they think that the naysayers are politically motivated to downplay the effectiveness of trade protectionism. The problem of Trump's potent brand of populism indeed may owe to many voters' genuine and well-grounded feelings of economic insecurity. But populism gains ground because coordination failures within political parties fail to rebut false claims, robbing voters of the opportunity to consider better choices. When individual politicians, even within the same party, contradict one another, voters find themselves in a more difficult information environment in which to evaluate competing claims. Stated in terms of Lupia and McCubbins's (1998) framework, the external availability of credible verification may be diminished today and the result might be increased deception and failed delegation. This is not an assertion per se but rather a possibility in need of study (Iyengar and Massey 2018).

STRATEGY AND INFORMATION: MEASURING PARTY CUES

Lupia and McCubbins (1998, 207) drew attention to the way political institutions shape and anchor the value of the party cue to voters seeking reliable information shortcuts. The authors (1998, 206) stated: "How voters make these choices is inherent in the varying value and usage of party cues." But party cues lose value for at least two reasons: (1) when they are internally divided; and (2) when there are so many parties that their connection to the process of legislative policy

In practice, a difficulty with Schattsneider's prescription for better cues is that only disciplined parties in a two-party system can credibly promise to deliver proposed policies if elected. The US system was designed with checks and balances to block "tyranny of the majority," creating the avenue for competition along multiple policy dimensions. Within the legislative branch alone, primaries—particularly those that take place in safe districts—further fragment party messaging. Party leaders are hardpressed to insist on tight policy platforms when well-mobilized groups in one electoral district are at odds with those in other districts, disinclining legislators to submit to party platforms that aim at the overall best interests of the country as a whole. Southern Democrats' withdrawal from the Democratic Party in the 1960s over differences about civil rights made the parties internally more coherent. However, primaries for legislative seats, which tend to be low-turnout elections, fragment the parties in new ways. Primaries pull politics away from the political middle by creating opportunities for Tea Party and other well-organized groups to gain a footing. Open-list proportional-representation electoral rules in a number of Latin American and former Eastern European countries are—if anything—even more damaging to party labels: candidates must compete against their copartisans for votes in the general election (Carey and Shugart 1995; Stein and Tommasi 2008).

Another problem is when there are too many parties from which to choose. Parties in proportional-representation systems, even when they are closed-list, confront voters with complicated informational cues because they typically form governing coalitions after elections. In this case, voters cannot know in advance what voting for a particular party will

mean for likely policy outcomes (Bawn and Rosenbluth 2006; Persson, Roland, and Tabellini 2007).

The question then becomes how to evaluate the quality of democratic accountability in our (second-best) systems. What is needed, in the spirit of Lupia and McCubbins, is to measure how politicians' strategic behavior in different institutional

settings, the implications for institutional reform could be substantial. Such a finding would argue in favor of eliminating primaries and redistricting in favor of competitive, demographically heterogeneous districts such that the median voter in each district is closer to the national median voter. This setup would push in the direction of endogenous party

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settings affects voters' choices. Kernell (2018; forthcoming) found, for example, that allowing a wider set of voices to shape party platforms pulls policies away from the interests of the median voter. Another empirical strategy would be to enumerate vignette-based or conjoint survey experiments, in which voters are asked to choose between policies with randomly scrambled attributes. We might want to know, for example, the conditions under which voters favor broadly aimed policies with long-run payoffs—for example, education, health, and infrastructure—when they are traded off against the promise of low taxes (e.g., California's Proposition 13). How do voters view tradeoffs across policies when they are made aware of the costs of one set of preferences over their other preferences? Do voters adjust their learning styles?

As Lupia and McCubbins (1998) pointed out, people ascertain information from various sources (i.e., traditional media, parties/partisanship, neighbors, and friends), and they choose which sources to rely on based on reliability and alignment. How do different institutional environments determine which cues people use? Might individuals have more trust in parties with centralized nomination procedures? If so, do voters rely more on party cues in centralized systems and more on the media in decentralized systems? How do voters differentiate between party cues and candidate appeals? (See, e.g., Bawn et al. 2012; Hall and Thompson 2018; Hirano, Snyder, and Ting 2009; Snyder, Hirano, and Ting 2018.) Do individuals find new heuristics when institutions change? Lupia and McCubbins acknowledged heterogeneity among responses based on individual-level attributes, but this variation may reflect systematic, measurable differences in institutional settings.

Whatever we learn about voter preferences in different contexts, politicians in most institutional contexts cannot commit to policies that are good for most voters in the long run. A single-dimensional policy space is likely to be stable only in single-member district systems with two disciplined parties competing for the median voter (Ferejohn 1993; Grofman 2017; Hinich and Munger 1996). In almost any other setting imaginable, politicians have incentives to introduce additional policy dimensions that cater to narrower groups of well-organized interests (Riker 1986). However, if voters' preferences are more closely approximated in single-issue–dimension

strengthening because representatives of each district would share with party leaders an incentive to be strategically moderate in favor of majority-benefiting policies (Cox 1986; Rosenbluth and Shapiro 2018).

CONCLUSION

Lupia and McCubbins (1998) opened an important path of scholarship analyzing the conditions under which voters gain the information necessary to hold representatives democratically accountable. In the two decades since their book was published, scholars have learned volumes about voters' use of party and other cues for information shortcuts, corroborating their intuition. The other half of their research program—to understand how institutions shape politicians' strategic use of issue dimensions—remains underexplored. Lupia and McCubbins pointed the way to an important research agenda that lies ahead: to vary strategic settings in which voters choose.

NOTE

1. Anthropologist and biometrician Frank Galston's famous experiment, published in 1907 in *Nature*, showed the remarkable accuracy of the median entry of nearly 800 people guessing the weight of a bull at a stock-and-poultry exhibition in Western England (Wallis 2014, 420). Wallis also reported that, for whatever reason, the distribution of guesses had fatter tails than the normal distribution and that underestimation was greater than overestimation.

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