

# Critical Dialogue

**Who Governs? Presidents, Public Opinion, and Manipulation.** By James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 192p. \$75.00 cloth, \$25.00 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592716001390

— Daniel M. Butler

With *Who Governs?* James Druckman and Lawrence Jacobs will change the debate about the relationship between public opinion and what elites do. The debate itself is not new. While studies in political science have long investigated how much voters' preferences shape politicians' actions,<sup>1</sup> in recent decades research has started to consider the possibility that politicians might be shaping public opinion too.<sup>2</sup> In *Who Governs?* Druckman and Jacobs show that presidents have created an apparatus to help them follow public opinion and then potentially insulate themselves from it. They have shown that politicians have the tools necessary to shape opinion and not simply respond to it.

Druckman and Jacobs are able to document the extent to which presidents have created a public opinion-shaping apparatus, having compiled an amazing dataset using the papers of three U.S. presidents. From these new documents, we learn that presidents are extensively polling on public opinion. Presidents are also using those polls to learn about how voters respond to different frames. Druckman and Jacobs show that not only are presidents gathering poll data, but this information shapes what issues presidents talk about. While their work focuses on the presidency, it is likely that individual MCs, the major political parties, and other political actors have created similar tools for themselves.

Druckman and Jacobs, by documenting the apparatus that presidents have created, have also laid out an important research agenda for future scholars. While *Who Governs?* will inspire numerous studies, I want to highlight a few questions that deserve scholars' attention.

First, I believe that a two-way street connects politicians' positions and public opinion; each affects the other.<sup>3</sup> What is unclear is how much and under what circumstances. Druckman and Jacobs find that public opinion, at least in some cases, is shaped by presidents' rhetoric, but we need more work to understand how big the effect is. Is this effect bigger than the effect of public opinion on

politicians' positions? I do not think that we currently have the appropriate research design and measurement approach to document how much each factor influences the other; however, I am more convinced than ever that we should try to measure the relative impact that public opinion and politicians' positions have on each other.

Second, when can public opinion be shaped? Druckman and Jacobs lay out a convincing argument that presidents can only shape public opinion on some issues. "[W]hen the public holds strong opinions about an issue, it will be difficult to change basic preferences or the importance attached to the policy" (p. 15). Politicians may gather public opinion so that they can learn where the public is persuadable. Research can and should test when politicians are convincing in shaping opinion.

Third, should we be worried that politicians have this apparatus? Druckman and Jacobs raise flags of concern about this development; however, they also acknowledge that there are times when we might want politicians to try to shape public opinion (p. 98). Answering this question requires both normative and empirical work.

One place to start might simply be to ask ourselves how we would like to politicians to act in relation to public opinion. One reasonable answer is that we might want politicians to represent the public on issues that voters feel strongly about, but exercise discretion on other issues. If we wanted politicians to always do what the public wanted on every issue, then we could limit all questions to public referendum. However, there are advantages to delegating to representatives. If the public does not feel strongly about an issue, then we could be better off by trusting a representative who would do the research on our behalf and then make the best decision possible. Of course for a representative to know when they should exercise discretion would require them to collect data on public opinion.

If politicians approached representation in the manner outlined above, we would observe something very close to what Druckman and Jacobs actually find: politicians who poll extensively about public opinion and then deviate from the public's preferences on issues that the public does not feel strongly about. While I personally want politicians who are responsive to public opinion, I also want politicians who exercise opinion leadership when it is in their citizens'

interests. The difficulty is that one individual's opinion leadership is another's opinion manipulation.

At this point I am still more optimistic than Druckman and Jacobs. I think that most politicians are genuinely striving to make decisions that they think are best for their constituents. However, that is an open empirical question and one that we should be pursuing. Druckman and Jacobs lay groundwork for us and so we should take note and build on their work.

While I am more optimistic about representation than Druckman and Jacobs, I think that they actually undersell the *potential* negative consequences of the development they document for American democracy. Because of the nature of their data, they focus on communication between the president and the public. In practice however, there are competing voices all vying for attention and serving as potential counterweights in the struggle for public opinion. This leaves open the possibility that no single voice will be able to move opinion much. Indeed, one of the solutions raised at the end of the book is that we can minimize undue influence by promoting competition. Such competition will only work if in fact all voices are represented; however, if all of the sides shared the same bias, competition would do nothing to mitigate such a bias. Druckman's and Jacobs' results are important because they raise the stakes. Politicians now have tools that allow them to better learn about and shape public opinion. While I am more optimistic that many of them use these tools for good, the fact that they have more powerful tools should cause us to be vigilant in learning and monitoring how those tools are used.

### Notes

- 1 Downs (1957); Miller and Stokes (1963).
- 2 Lenz (2012); Minozzi et al. (2014).
- 3 Butler and Nickerson (2011); Broockman and Butler (Forthcoming).

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### Response to Daniel M. Butler's review of *Who Governs? Presidents, Public Opinion, and Manipulation*

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— James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs

We thank Dan Butler for his insightful comments regarding our book and the opportunity to respond.

Butler emphasizes that there is a "two-way street" between politicians' positions and public opinion with each affecting one another. *Who Governs?* revealed that the dynamics of elite politics in the US requires a shift from how constituents influence representatives (the focus of Butler's own research and that of many others) to considering the reverse dynamics - how lawmakers affect citizens. Presidents, we demonstrate, have reorganized the White House to focus on changing public opinion; the nature and scope of their success is, in our view, the primary research question.

The study of political representation—and, specifically, the empirical studies of government "responsiveness" and citizen "influence"—must be thoroughly reexamined on several fronts to fully incorporate the strategic choices of presidents and other political elites. First, political representation research must reassess which issues to study. *Who Governs?* demonstrated that political elites select particular issues from a large pool because they advance their interests. The implication is that researchers must be alert to the issues that the media and political elites do not poll in order to avoid selection bias and miss the effects of elite agenda setting. Second, future research must specify the type of representation. We show that politicians make strategic choices about whether to rely on data on specific issues to respond to citizen policy preferences (as many researchers assume), collect general ideological data to align with public's general mood (as Erikson and Stimson argue), or use research on personality traits to skip policy representation altogether in order to shirk policy representation and widen their leeway to act. Third, salience is not exogenous to elite influence. Focusing on whether elites are responsive on issues of strong public interest risks the endogeneity problem. As we show, politicians deliberately prime salience for strategic ends.

Butler's speculation about whether we should worry about the expansive polling operations of politicians is moot: they exist and elites use them to move public opinion to create discretion to pursue the policies preferred

by themselves and their allies. Indeed, our research finds a pervasive intent to manipulate within the White House.

It is time to recast our study of political representation from the simplistic and misleading concept of responsiveness *per se* and instead focus on the nature of competition and participation.<sup>1</sup> Competition fundamentally affects opinion formation and limits elite leeway while mobilized participation is a tool for citizens to influence policy agendas.<sup>2</sup> The threat to US democracy is not simply weak “responsiveness” but rather constrained competition and inequities in participation.

## Notes

- 1 also see Schattschneider 1960, p. 138, and Dahl 1971, p. 4.
- 2 Disch 2012, p. 610.

## References

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**Representing the Advantaged: How Politicians Reinforce Inequality.** By Daniel M. Butler. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 158p. \$80.00 cloth, \$28.99 paper. doi:10.1017/S1537592716001419

— James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs

Why has economic inequality remained and expanded in a political system that features competitive battles for elected office? After all, competitive elections have long been expected to motivate politicians seeking office or reelection to follow the policy preferences of the median voter or, at a minimum, to rectify sagging economic circumstances in anticipation that voters will punish them for a disappointing record in office.<sup>1</sup> A large and longstanding body of research has confirmed these expectations by reporting “policy responsiveness”—the tendency of government policy to match the policy preferences of citizens.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, growing bodies of research are demonstrating that economic inequality has expanded to levels in the United States that are without parallel among western democratic countries. The catalogue of causes include government policy that has either failed to act adequately in the face of accelerating market pressures for inequality or facilitated the concentration of income and wealth through tax policy, inadequate assistance for vulnerable populations, weaker protections for labor

organizing, and growing deference to finance (Alvaredo, Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez 2013; Piketty 2015; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Jacobs and King 2016).

But why has wealth and income become more concentrated even though competitive elections continue to offer the institutional means for prospective and retrospective choices by voters? A stream of recent studies offer a response: continued and perhaps increasing declines in “policy responsiveness” and, more precisely, what we refer to as “segmented responsiveness”—the disproportionate tailoring of policy to the wishes and wants of whites and the affluent as compared to middle and lower-income Americans and people of color.<sup>3</sup>

Two explanations stand out for the puzzle of waning policy responsiveness and deteriorating economic circumstances within liberal democracy.

First, the political rights to participate in elections, contact officeholders, contribute to campaigns, and other forms of engagement are not exercised equally. “Unequal voice” and the relatively muted participation of the less well-off enable the affluent to dominate what policy makers hear and the intensity with which those messages register in the halls of government and the ears of elected officials (Schlozman, Verba and Brady 2012; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). The implication is that elected officials would rectify inequality if political participation by people of color and middle and lower income citizens was similar to that of whites and the affluent.

But how decisive is political participation in dictating policy? Daniel Butler’s *Representing the Advantaged* rejects the participation account based on his findings from clever field experiments that investigated the responses of officeholders to requests from putative constituents. “[E]ven if all voters participate at equal rates,” he reports, “we will still observe bias in representation. . . . [because] differences in participation alone cannot explain bias in representation” (pp. 1–3).

The second explanation, which Butler and our research advances, is that inequality and the breakdown of policy responsiveness results from “who governs”—the people in office and the incentives and institutions that condition their behavior. Before we elaborate this account, we want to clarify that participation and elite accounts are not mutually exclusive: Unequal voice shapes the motivations of elected officials and, in turn, the disregard of elites for less-well established citizens impacts their motivations and resources to participate (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Campbell 2003; Mettler and Soss 2004). Stronger participation would bring new and louder voices into the halls of government, but the “inequality elite” account insists that more equal voice would not dislodge policy makers and elite governance that systematically cater to the affluent and the best organized.

Elite politics has erected several barriers to using liberal democratic institutions to reverse historic inequality. For Butler, governing elites bring “information, opinions, and attitudes. . . into office [that] lead to significant bias in representation.” The bias is baked into their personal preferences and experiences that inform what positions they adopt, how they evaluate citizen demands, and their decisions about whether or not to respond.

In our book, we shift from the personal mindsets of officials to the incentive structure and institutional capacities of officeholders, drawing on quantitative and qualitative analyses of presidential archives. Our study of the Reagan White House reveals that he systematically tailored his policies to the affluent and to party activists who had become increasingly influential in the nomination process. The incentives of the party nomination process reward those who uncompromisingly follow the policy goals that they and their supporters favor (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Wood 2009). What about the risks of not following the median voter? Reagan and other presidents used the White House’s institutional capacity to privately track and attempt to manipulate public opinion to create leeway: They focused on salient issues (expanding their freedom to act on less visible issues) and built appealing personal images.

Both our account and Butler’s indicate that the link between competitive elections and responsive policy making has been disrupted. Politicians stick to their personal agendas; they are guided by incentive structures that promise certain punishment for compromising policy goal while posing only uncertain consequences for wandering from the views of median voters; and they are confident in their institutional capacity to manipulate voters and shirk accountability. Political representation remains but has a different form: It has been displaced from competition among politicians over aligning their policies with those preferred by the median voter and, instead, involves segmented representation and a reconstitution of representation from policy to non-policy grounds.

Bias is, of course, not new to American politics (Schattschneider 1960; Mills 1956). What is new today is the magnitude of the disparities and the consequences for reconcentrating wealth and income. Today’s extraordinary bias results from the confluence of intensifying global and domestic sources of market-generated inequality and breakdowns in the liberal democratic links between competitive elections and responsive policy making.

### Notes

- 1 Downs 1957; Mayhew 1974; Dahl 1971; Fiorina 1981.
- 2 Miller and Stokes 1963; Page and Shapiro 1983; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002.
- 3 We refer to this selective responsiveness as “segmented representation.” Druckman and Jacobs 2015.

See for larger body of research on segmented representation Jacobs and Page 2005; Gilens 2012; Bartels 2008; Griffin and Newman 2008.

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**Response to James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs's review of *Representing the Advantaged: How Politicians Reinforce Inequality***

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— Daniel M. Butler

Druckman and Jacobs have written an excellent review that shows the importance of studying representation. They have also done a great job laying out the insights

from both books. In the end we agree on many things. Most importantly, we agree that politicians exhibit biases that favor certain, advantaged groups.

Our agreement highlights an important research agenda for scholars: What can be done to reduce this bias? We should not be satisfied with simply doing work that identifies bias (and I include my own work in that category). We can and should do more to learn about what can minimize bias in representation. What electoral systems, institutional rules, and other interventions reduce bias in representation?

The answer to this question will also resolve the points of disagreement between me and Druckman and Jacobs. When we as a scholarly community identify what reduces bias, we will also learn something about the cause of that bias. Do politicians exhibit favoritism towards some groups because they have inherent biases they bring to office (as I have argued) or is there a greater degree of intentionality behind the observed representational discrepancy (as Druckman and Jacobs argue). Studying how to minimize the bias will help answer these questions and will also, hopefully, provide insights that improve the political system.