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The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London

Printed in the United States of America
09 08 07 06 05 04 03 02 01 00 1 2 3 4 5

ISBN: 0-226-38982-0 (cloth)
ISBN: 0-226-38983-9 (paper)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jacobs, Lawrence R.
Politicians don't pander : political manipulation and the loss of democratic responsiveness / Lawrence R. Jacobs, Robert Y. Shapiro.
p. cm.—(Studies in communication, media, and public opinion)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 0-226-38982-0 (cloth : alk. paper)—ISBN 0-226-38983-9 (pbk : alk. paper)
1. Political planning—United States. 2. Public opinion—United States. 3. Representative government and representation—United States. 4. Political leadership—United States. 5. Politicians—United States. I. Shapiro, Robert Y., 1953– II. Title. III. Series.

JK468.P64J36 2000
324'.0973—dc21

99-086011

♾ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro

Politicians Don't Pander

Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS
CHICAGO AND LONDON

Chapter One

The Myth of Pandering and Theories of Political Motivation

Public opinion polls are everywhere. The media report them without stop and political activists of all kinds—from candidates in election contests to political parties and interest groups—pump millions into focus groups and polls. The flood of polls has fueled the nearly unquestioned assumption among observers of American politics that elected officials "pander" to public opinion. Politicians, it is charged, tailor their significant policy decisions to polls and other indicators of public opinion. Elected officials are faced with the terrifying choice of pandering or perishing in the next election and—as a 1997 article in the *Atlantic Monthly* exclaimed—are "running scared" and are settling for "poll readership" (A. King 1997; Penny 1994; Lewis 1993; Safire 1996). The *New Yorker* nostalgically wished for the golden years of "the silent majority" as it bemoaned the current era in which "what 'the American people' think trumps." Political commentators and policymakers lament that the politicians who do exercise independence from public opinion are not reelected or drop out, and the officeholders who remain have stopped "deciding, and saying, what they themselves think" in their zeal to anticipate the reaction of future voters (Hertzberg 1998). The enormous cost of "mass participatory democracy" is the abdication of responsible leadership that promotes the national interest, and the abandonment—as *New York Times* columnist Anthony Lewis put it—of "the Framers' constitutional design for a more reflective, more considered form of government" (Lewis 1993).

Bill Clinton is often singled out as exemplifying the kind of politician who "rel[ies] too heavily on polling information," "follows them

slavishly," and allows "decisions [to be] simply driven by polls."[1] Journalists (including *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd) seized on Clinton's high profile relationship with his pollster, Dick Morris, as "demonstrat[ing] that polling has turned leaders into followers" (Dowd 1997).

The idea that politicians succumb to public opinion has been accepted not only by the press and political elites but also by some scholars (Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998; Geer 1996). While research (including our own) over the years has found evidence of government responsiveness, perhaps the strongest recent claim that politicians incessantly follow public opinion comes from the work of James Stimson, Michael MacKuen, and Robert Erikson,[2] who tracked the decisions of American government on domestic affairs (e.g., legislation enacted by Congress) since the 1950s and constructed global measures of liberalism and conservatism for each year. The researchers then asked: Did changes in government policy in a liberal or conservative direction correspond to changes in public support for more or less government? They found that government policy followed public opinion as it moved in a liberal direction in the 1960s, in a conservative direction around 1980, and then back toward a liberal course in the late 1980s. They concluded that politicians behave "[l]ike antelopes in an open field": "When politicians perceive public opinion change, they adapt their behavior to please their constituency" (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995, 545, 559).

Despite the strong claims of this account, there is much more to the story. A growing body of evidence suggests that since the 1970s the policy decisions of presidents and members of Congress have become less responsive to the substantive policy preferences of the average American.[3] Alan Monroe's (1998) research shows that government policies in the 1980–93 period were less consistent with the preferences of a *majority* of Americans than during 1960–79. He found that the consistency of government policies with majority public preferences on over five hundred issues declined from 63 percent in the period 1960–79 to 55 percent in 1980–93.[4]

Monroe's study is partly confirmed by our own preliminary study. We compared changes in public preferences toward social policies and congruent changes in government policy and found a noticeable decline in correspondence in opinion and policy changes during the 1980s and especially the 1990s than found during earlier periods (Jacobs and Shapiro 1997a; Page and Shapiro 1983).[5]

Another important study by Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart (1998a) examined the responsiveness of members of the House of Representatives between 1874 and 1996. They used the Republican share of the presidential two-party vote within each congressional district as an indicator of constituency opinions, and compared it to the ideological position of each party's candidates for the House of Representatives. They found that the candidates' ideological responsiveness to opinion within their district was weak prior to the 1930s, steadily rose between 1934 and its peak in the early 1970s, then declined into the 1990s (precipitously among Republican candidates).

A growing body of research suggests, then, that policymakers' responsiveness to public opinion is complex and defies classification into the polar extremes of either persistent responsiveness (Downs 1957) or incessant unresponsiveness to public opinion (Ginsberg 1986). The challenge is to explain *variation over time* in the responsiveness of policymakers to public preferences. Evidence that contemporary politicians follow public opinion less than their predecessors fits into a longer historical pattern of variation in responsiveness. One study found that responsiveness has waxed and waned over the course of 120 years (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 1998a). Still another study reported that the correspondence between changes of public preferences and subsequent changes in government policy varied noticeably between the 1930s and 1980. The incidence of changes in policy paralleling changes in public opinion declined from 67 percent during the 1935–45 period (heavily dominated by wartime issues) to 54 percent during the 1960s, and then increased to 75 percent during the 1970s (Shapiro 1982; Page and Shapiro 1983).

The general decline in responsiveness of politicians since the 1970s is connected, we will argue, to two of the most widely debated and worrisome trends in American politics: the mass media's preoccupation with political conflict and strategy, and the record proportion of Americans who distrust politicians—convinced that they no longer listen to them.

The relationship between the policy decisions that politicians make and the policy preferences of ordinary citizens raises three fundamental questions about American politics. First, why does responsiveness vary over time? Investigating long-term variations of responsiveness is complicated by shorter-term fluctuations. For instance, as the presidential election approached in the summer of 1996, congressional Republicans and Clinton briefly replaced partisan gridlock with a brief period of working together to pass legislation that had strong public support, such as the minimum wage law, the Kennedy-Kassebaum re-

form of private health insurance operations, and, arguably, welfare reform. What, then, would explain the pattern since the 1970s of a long-term decline in responsiveness interrupted by short-term rises in responsiveness that appeared tied to the electoral cycle?

Second, is there a causal connection between politicians' responsiveness to public opinion and other trends in American politics? In particular, to what extent has politicians' detachment from public opinion affected the media and public opinion itself?

Third, does representative democracy require a high level of responsiveness? Or does it require that politicians discount current public opinion in order to act in the best interests of citizens?

This chapter and the next develop a general explanation for the variation in politicians' responsiveness and how their behavior and strategies have affected the media and public opinion. In subsequent chapters, we present a large body of supportive evidence. The concluding chapters turn to the normative question of whether responsiveness is an essential feature of representative democracy.

Explaining how and why responsiveness to public opinion varies requires understanding the motivations of presidents and legislators. This chapter examines two long-standing but competing explanations for the motivations of politicians. The first account consists of "median voter" theory and the retrospective voting model and emphasizes the personal benefits politicians expect from pursuing policies favored by most voters—what we will refer to as "centrist" opinion. (We use the term "centrist opinion" to refer to the median voter or citizen in the distribution of public opinion and not to an ideologically fixed "left" or "right.") These accounts explain why many political observers assume that politicians are highly responsive. This "strong responsiveness" perspective directly connects competitive elections to the policymaking process, but it is hard-pressed to explain any general increase or decrease in responsiveness. Further, it underestimates strategic behavior by elites to attempt to change (and not simply accept) centrist opinion.

The second explanation predicts that politicians will pursue their own policy goals and those of their partisan supporters, interest groups, or other policymakers in government. This policy-oriented account challenges the widespread presumption among political observers that public opinion persistently drives policy decisions; instead, it suggests that these decisions are driven whenever politically possible by the policy objectives of politicians and their supporters. Presidents and legislators attempt to minimize the electoral risk of pursuing their policy goals by developing strategies to shield their decisions from the

scrutiny of voters. This account alone, however, cannot explain politicians' comparatively high responsiveness to public opinion in the past and during election periods.

The strong responsiveness model and the policy-oriented accounts share two limitations. First, neither account explains the *variation* in politicians' responsiveness—its decline over the past two decades and its short-term rise and fall during election cycles. We need a theory of political motivations to explain the changing weight that politicians assign to following centrist opinion. Second, both accounts treat politicians' motivations as largely divorced from media coverage and the dynamics of public opinion, neglecting the interrelationships among the three.[6] The decisions of politicians to follow centrist opinion or to pursue their policy goals affect both the media's coverage of politics and public opinion and, in turn, the decisions of politicians are affected by the behavior of the media and public opinion.

We offer in chapter 2 an alternative account of politicians' motivations that both synthesizes the strong responsiveness and policy-oriented accounts and incorporates media coverage and public opinion. We argue that the motivations of politicians are dynamic and conditional on political and institutional developments. A number of factors including the increase since the early 1970s of the institutional independence of government officials and, most importantly, ideological polarization within Washington and among congressional districts have elevated the perceived benefits to politicians of pursuing the policy goals that they and their narrow group of supporters favor. Compromising policy goals in favor of centrist national opinion has become more costly to politicians since the 1970s. The approach of elections, however, still raises (over the short-term) the costs to politicians of discounting centrist opinion, thereby temporarily creating incentives to heed public opinion.

Politicians' perceptions of the costs and benefits of their behavior affect their strategy. The priority they attach to policy goals has prompted politicians to attempt to lower the potential electoral costs of discounting centrist opinion by *crafting* their arguments and rhetoric. Presidents and legislators carefully track public opinion in order to identify the words, arguments, and symbols that are most likely to be effective in attracting favorable press coverage and ultimately "winning" public support for their desired policies. Politicians' attempts to change public sentiment toward their favored position convinces them that they can pursue their policy objectives while minimizing the risks of electoral punishment. The irony of contemporary politics is that

politicians both slavishly track public opinion and, contrary to the myth of "pandering," studiously avoid simply conforming policy to what the public wants.

We argue that politicians' pursuits of policy goals have created a reinforcing spiral or cycle that encompasses media coverage and public opinion. It is characterized by three features. First, the polarization of Washington political elites and their strategies to manipulate the media and gain public support have prompted the press to increasingly emphasize or frame its coverage in terms of political conflict and strategy at the expense of the substance of policy issues and problems. Although news reports largely represent the genuine contours of American politics, the media's organizational, financial, and professional incentives prompt them to exaggerate the degree of conflict in order to produce simple, captivating stories for their audiences.

Second, the increased political polarization and politicians' strategy of crafting what they say and do (as conveyed through press coverage) raise the probability of both changes in public understandings and evaluations of specific policy proposals, and public perceptions that proposals for policy change make uncertain or threaten the personal well-being of individual Americans. The presence of a vocal political opposition, combined with the media's attentiveness to the ensuing conflict and the public's skittishness about change, often prevents reformers from changing public opinion as they intended.

Third, the cycle closes as the media's coverage and the public's reaction that was initially sparked by politicians' actions feed back into the political arena. How politicians appraise the media's coverage of their initial actions affects their future strategy and behavior. Politicians latch on to any evidence of changes in public opinion that are favorable to their positions in order to justify their policies and to increase the electoral risk of their rivals for opposing them.

Our explanation for the variations in responsiveness to public opinion draws on existing research as well as an in-depth analysis of two dramatic episodes in national policymaking: Clinton's health care reform campaign during 1993 and 1994 and the Republican "Revolution" led by House Speaker Newt Gingrich in 1995–96. Clinton and then the Gingrich Congress proposed sweeping legislation based on the policy goals that they and their relatively narrow group of core supporters favored. Most Americans, however, opposed or were, at best, ambivalent toward their specific initiatives. As the 1996 presidential elections approached, however, congressional Republicans and Clinton shifted gears for a very brief period to work together to pass legislation that the public strongly supported.

Our investigation of these cases (and especially the Clinton episode) is based on a variety of in-depth evidence (including interviews with congressional and administration officials, content analysis of Clinton's statements, and detailed legislative histories) that offers an "insider" perspective on the intentions, perceptions, and decisions of elected officeholders and their staffs;[7] extensive content analysis of media coverage over a nearly two-decade period; and quantitative analysis of data from national public opinion surveys.

We are especially interested in the *collective responsiveness* of an institution like Congress or the national government as a whole to *national* public opinion.[8] (We discuss research on political representation in appendix 1.) These cases are moderately difficult tests of national policymakers' responsiveness to centrist opinion. The characteristics of the Gingrich and, especially, the Clinton health reform cases—high salience, social welfare issues, and high levels of public support for policy positions—make them likely candidates for responsiveness by policymakers.[9]

We use the Clinton and Gingrich cases of major policy innovation to generate research questions, theoretical arguments, and empirically grounded explanations for the interconnections of politicians, journalists, and public opinion. We are especially interested in investigating the mechanisms that produced the decline in responsiveness, and in breaking into the "black box" of policymaking, democratic linkages between government officials and citizens, and the process of public communications about politics. We ground the study of policymaking in the study of the press and public opinion: the institutions and practices of public communications reflect and shape the links between politicians and the mass public. Future research can examine further these issues for a wider set of cases in domestic and foreign affairs, using different methodologies.

In the next section, we examine further the contrasting interpretations of political motivations offered by the strong responsiveness theory and the policy-oriented account. In chapter 2, we distinguish our conditional model of political motivation from the prevailing accounts and discuss the interconnections of politicians' behavior, the media, and public opinion.

What Motivates Politicians

Theoretical and empirical analysis of the motivations of politicians has led to the conclusion that legislators and presidents value two goals most: enacting their desired policies and securing their reelection or

that of their party by responding to centrist public opinion when making policy (Smith and Deering 1990; Bianco 1994, 36–37, 71, and chap. 4; Cohen 1997, chap. 1).[10] Richard Fenno's (1973) landmark study established, for instance, that two of the basic goals that motivate House members are making "good public policy" and reelection. While Fenno argued that exercising influence within the House of Representatives was a third goal, most subsequent analysis posits policy and electoral goals as predominant (Smith and Deering 1990).

Most career politicians prefer issues that allow them to improve their opportunities for reelection while also pursuing their policy goals. Indeed, many find that their reelection and policy goals overlap on some issues; their preferred policies are also favored by those who elect them. In addition, political leaders attempt to avoid public decisions that force themselves or their partisans into uncomfortable tradeoffs by attempting to control the agenda of decision making.

Most politicians, however, are not able to restrict their choices to issues that require little sacrifice of either policy or political goals. Actions by presidents, legislators, and other political activists force government decisions—often on salient issues that divide the political parties—that confront politicians with a choice between their electoral and policy goals. Modern presidents, for instance, often find themselves in a "no win" situation of attempting to satisfy the expectations of both mass public opinion and a narrower group of supporters in their political parties and Washington (Cronin 1980; Rockman 1984; Edwards 1983; Lowi 1985). Legislators are similarly confronted with balancing their own policy preferences against the preferences of those who elected them (Bianco 1994, 36–37, 71, and chap. 4). The result is that politicians often make tradeoffs among their goals, sacrificing one goal in order to achieve another more highly valued one.

Most presidents and members of Congress are not singularly committed either to their policy or electoral goals. The normal tactical problem facing politicians, then, is to adopt positions that fall between their own policy preferences and the preferences of centrist opinion (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1994, 31).

The tactical adjustments that politicians make between advancing their electoral ambitions and their desired policies reflect in large part their perceptions of the costs and benefits associated with each goal. Their policy positions and actual decisions or votes on specific legislation reflect the tradeoff of the personal benefits of pursuing policy goals versus the anticipated electoral costs of discounting centrist opinion. But compromising policy goals can also be costly; these costs

may be sufficiently high to persuade even vulnerable politicians to support policies opposed by centrist opinion. For instance, vulnerable House Republicans voted to defy the preferences of large majorities of Americans and impeach Clinton because they anticipated that failure to support the party's policy goal would be punished by their core supporters and allies—they would suffer a drop in campaign contributions, increased support among party activists for a primary challenger, and the antipathy of their colleagues and party leaders. The political price of bucking their party's goals was high and close to certain; the ultimate electoral costs of defying centrist opinion were less clear given the nearly two years until the next election and the likelihood that most voters would move on to other matters and would be less concerned about impeachment when they cast their ballot in the next election.

The efforts of politicians to weigh the costs and benefits of policy and electoral goals are most significantly influenced by their constituents, but constituents do not provide a clear and uniform signal to politicians about which goal to favor. Presidents and legislators are most strongly concerned with two sets of constituents: the narrow group of loyal partisans who are necessary to win primary contests, and the broader group of "swing" voters who move between the parties and are often necessary to win the general election (Fenno 1978; Fiorina 1974; Mayhew 1974a, 45; Wayne 1997; Cohen 1997, 20–22). Politicians often find it difficult to reconcile the intense preferences of the narrow group of loyal party activists and the more centrist views of the general electorate on salient issues.

Despite the political importance of constituents, politicians are uncertain about the costs and benefits of policy decisions regarding their various constituents and how their constituents will react to legislation after it is implemented. The modern presidency and its administrative divisions, such as the Office of Management and Budget, developed in order to increase the executive branch's information and analytic capacity and to enable presidents to pursue effectively their various political objectives (Moe 1985; Greenstein 1988; Ragsdale and Theis 1997; Burke 1949). In reaction to the development of the presidency and to address their own institutional needs, Congress designed rules and procedures that provided incentives for members to acquire policy expertise and to widely distribute detailed, accurate information to otherwise ill-informed colleagues (Krehbiel 1991). Improved policy expertise enhanced the capacity of legislators and presidents to anticipate the consequences of their policy decisions but did not determine

whether this capacity was used to pursue electoral or policy goals: policy expertise may be used to identify the most effective avenue to achieve policy goals or to lower uncertainty about what legislation would appeal to the most voters.

Obviously, there are significant differences in the choices facing House members, senators, and presidents. The composition of many congressional districts, for instance, provides individual House members with enough partisan supporters to win the general election without having to broaden their appeal to voters outside their party. Although we highlight these differences below, presidents, most senators, many House members, and legislative leaders generally engage in broadly similar calculations regarding their multiple constituents as they weigh their policy and electoral goals.

Two long-standing accounts of elections offer divergent predictions about politicians' motivations as they balance their policy and electoral goals in the face of multiple and often competing constituencies. The first account emphasizes the motivations of politicians to discount their policy goals in order to pursue their electoral objectives and respond to centrist opinion. By contrast, the second account posits policy goals as predominant. We draw on these standard models of voting in order to generate theoretical expectations about the motivations of politicians when making policy. Our purpose is not to endorse one approach over another; rather, we seek to synthesize the two in order to explain variations over time in politicians' motivations.

Strong Responsiveness to Centrist Opinion

The median voter theory and the retrospective voting model share a common prediction—that the personal benefits of electoral goals dominate the calculations of candidates and officeholders in an inclusive and competitive system of elections. Elections create strong incentives for politicians to follow the policy preferences of centrist opinion when reaching government decisions between elections. David Mayhew argues, for instance, that the Congress is "entirely motivated by reelection" and that the behavior of its members can be explained as "single-minded reelection seeking" (Mayhew 1974a, 16–17). (We use the term "electoral goal" to signify the political calculations to respond to centrist opinion.)

In both models of motivation, politicians treat their policy positions primarily as a means or instrument for holding their party supporters and appealing to the centrist opinion in their constituency. Compromising policy goals to respond to centrist opinion can be costly: it can

alienate party activists and other supporters and compel politicians to sublimate their own personal beliefs about "good public policy." But, according to the strong responsiveness account, politicians perceive the personal benefits of electoral goals as outweighing the costs of compromising policy goals.

The median voter theory associated most closely with Anthony Downs suggests that the competition of officeholders and candidates to win elections creates a tendency to use their actions and statements to appeal to centrist opinion (Downs 1957; Black 1958). Although Downs does recognize situations where centrist opinion is discounted by politicians, his primary prediction is that competing candidates will minimize the distance between their announced policy positions and voters' policy preferences and will converge at the midpoint of public opinion.[11] Two predictions are especially relevant for our purposes. First, centrist opinion is posited as a critical constituent: the competition for voters among opposing candidates and officeholders drives them to pursue the centrist constituent even at the risk of alienating more extreme supporters (Downs 1957; Black 1958; Enelow and Hinich 1984). Second, the means for pursuing the electoral center are the policy positions of the politician and the median voter: candidates (including incumbents) and officeholders use their policy positions to appeal to centrist voters based on their shared positions.

The median voter model concludes that candidates will offer clear policy positions that approximate the preferences of voters. When voters fail to perceive the positions of one candidate as closer to their own, Downs and then others (Fiorina 1981) predict retrospective voting as a fallback model for producing strong political responsiveness.

The alternative model—retrospective voting—suggests that voters look back over national and international conditions during the term in office of the incumbent candidate and party with an eye to the future. In particular, voters are expected to evaluate individual candidates and their parties in terms of both their policy positions and the overall performance of the nation's economy and foreign policy. Officeholders anticipate the public's retrospective judgment at the next election and adopt policies or otherwise create conditions while in office that will appeal to most voters. Politicians, then, have incentives to be responsive to centrist opinion because they expect to be held accountable at the next election for their salient policy positions and national and international conditions during their term in office: incumbents and the party in power will be punished for unpopular policy positions and disappointing economic and foreign policy performance. Like the median voter theory, the retrospective model presumes that

public opinion is critical to politicians and that policy positions (in conjunction with favorable national conditions) are an important means for winning.

The retrospective model raises a complex but important issue for studying responsiveness: politicians adopt positions to help them in the election by responding to *anticipated* future public opinion toward national economic and international conditions and discounting existing public preferences. For instance, John Zaller (1998) and Jeffrey Cohen (1997) suggest that presidents respond to anticipated future public opinion toward national and international conditions (support for economic growth and peace abroad) by adopting policy positions (e.g., cutting domestic spending) that may not be preferred at that moment by centrist voters or toward which public preferences are not well formed. (Arnold [1990] also emphasizes the responsiveness of legislators to anticipated public opinion.) Zaller and Cohen suggest that both President Reagan and President Clinton discounted existing centrist opinion (opposition to cutting specific government programs and, in Clinton's case, ambivalence to increasing taxes) in order to pursue policies that would produce strong economic performance, which voters would retrospectively judge favorably—as was apparently borne out by Reagan's reelection in 1984 and Clinton's reelection in 1996.

Two important differences distinguish the median voter and retrospective models. First, they adopt different evaluative perspectives: while the median voter theory expects voters to make prospective evaluations of whether their preferred policies will be enacted in the future, the retrospective model assumes that the evaluations of voters are based on looking back in time at the policy and national conditions that prevailed under individual officeholders and the party in control—voters use the past as a signal of future policy outcomes (Fiorina 1981; Fearon 1999). Second, each account, in reality, requires different levels of information, skills, and resources (compare part 1 and part 2 of Downs [1957]). The median voter model requires that voters possess the skills and invest the extensive time and energy necessary to assemble and analyze information on government policy, but the retrospective model imposes a much less stringent set of requirements to reach judgments—voters evaluate the everyday conditions of life and the actions of politicians based on media coverage or their own experiences and those of other people (Page 1978; Popkin 1991; Downs 1957, part 2).

In both the median voter and retrospective models, the motivations of second-term presidents are a bit unique because they cannot be elected to a third term. Even if it is an incumbent's final term, he is

expected to remain keenly attuned to centrist opinion in order to preserve his party's control of the White House, expand its ranks in Congress, and ensure the continued implementation of his agenda. In addition, a "lame duck" president is motivated to continue attracting public approval of his performance in order to improve his bargaining position and ability to persuade legislators and other policymakers (Neustadt 1980; Cohen 1997).

Contributions and Limitations

Although components of the retrospective and, especially, the median voter models have been challenged,[12] research does support their core propositions that centrist opinion stands out as a critical constituency and that politicians' positions and policy decisions are responsive to it. As we noted earlier, a large body of research shows that government policies have been strongly related to public opinion. In addition, research on the voting records of U.S. senators suggests that in states where no party dominates, the incumbent balances appeals to party activists with appeals to independent voters who fall in between these extremes (Shapiro, Brady, Brody, and Ferejohn 1990; Wright 1989). Responsiveness to independents serves to moderate the pressure from the more ideologically extreme and pulls the incumbent toward centrist opinion.

Research also suggests that voters remove politicians who offer only muted responsiveness. Patricia Hurley (1991) finds that the failure of Republicans to respond to independents and disaffected Democrats (and some Republican partisans) on a number of major issues prompted these more centrist voters to withdraw their support in favor of the Democratic Party in the 1982, 1984, and 1986 elections. The result was that Republicans were unable to sustain the realignment process sparked by the 1980 election.

Although the median voter and retrospective models usefully connect competitive elections with the motivations of politicians between elections, they suffer from two limitations. First, neither model is well positioned to account for the decline in responsiveness since the 1970s. The invariant motivations posited by each model—that politicians single-mindedly respond to centrist opinion—is ill-suited to explain change in political behavior. Second, they falsely assume that politicians accept public opinion as a given and operate under conditions of *certainty* regarding the future contours of public preferences (Downs 1957, part 1). Conservative or liberal legislators, for instance, are expected to wait until centrist opinion changes before pushing their

preferred programs (Kuklinski and Segura 1995). *Uncertainty,* however, is a critical influence on politicians' perception and treatment of public opinion. If presidents and legislators perceive public opinion as unreliable and susceptible to change, they have strong incentives to engage in strategic behavior to move the public's policy preferences in the direction they prefer.

Policy Goals and Deviations from Public Preferences

The policy-oriented approach offers an alternative to models that expect politicians to be driven by public opinion. It argues that politicians perceive strong personal benefits from pursuing policy goals that they believe constitute "good public policy" and are preferred by party activists, interests groups, and other policymakers (especially political leaders). Politicians, it is suggested, perceive the benefits of pursuing policy goals as greater than the costs of compromising their electoral goals and discounting the policy preferences of centrist opinion. Second-term presidents are expected to remain committed to their policy goals because of their personal preferences and their desire to secure a venerable legacy or mark on history.

The median voter and retrospective voting accounts predict that politicians will adjust their policy positions to align with centrist opinion. By contrast, the policy orientation account expects politicians to pursue steadfastly a stable set of policies. Indeed, politicians rarely change their voting patterns in Congress (Poole and Romer 1993; Lott and Bronars 1993). Routinely altering their policy positions risks not only alienating long-time supporters but also arming their next electoral opponents with the opportunity to seize upon inconsistencies as evidence of untrustworthiness while still highlighting any earlier unpopular positions (Kau and Rubin 1993; Lott and Davids 1992; Wright 1993). In short, it is politically infeasible for politicians to regularly change their positions in response to centrist opinion.

There are two variants of the policy-oriented approach: the *party vote* model and the *strategic shirking* account.

The Party Vote Model

The *party vote model* argues that candidates and officeholders follow the policy preferences of partisans, who include committed activists and leaders within the political parties as well as voters whose sense of attachment with one party prompts them to routinely choose its candidates (Aldrich 1995; Rohde 1991; Kiewiet and McCubbins 1991; Cox and McCubbins 1993; Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 1998a). The most important constituency, according to this model, are party activists who tend to harbor policy preferences ideologically to the extreme of centrist opinion. The influence of partisans on political motivation should not be confused, though, with the contribution of parties to governing capacity: compared to the British and other parliamentary systems of governance, American political parties are ineffective in fusing the legislative and executive branches, though the degree to which party control of both lawmaking branches facilitates American policymaking is a matter of dispute.[13]

The preferences of party loyalists are highly valued by presidents and legislators for three reasons. First, candidates are carefully screened by party elites and activists, who serve as gatekeepers and recruiters in identifying like-minded individuals to run for office (Wright 1989). Politicians are not simply a random sample of voters.

Second, candidates and officeholders are especially attentive to the preferences of committed party activists because they provide the bulk of the campaign's core votes, volunteers, and contributions to fund media advertising, consultants, and travel. The candidate's need for monetary contributions, which political parties and their activists help to generate, influences the selection of candidates and creates incentives for politicians to provide access to activists and privileged private interests; neither of which encourages the pursuit of centrist opinion.

Party activists, then, are critical to most candidates. In addition to providing a critical base of support in the general election, they control the nomination process in primary elections; the low turnout in these contests means that each party's most active and committed members exercise a disproportionate influence (Fiorina 1974; Aranson and Ordeshook 1972; Page 1978; Wright 1989).

Third, partisans are easier to represent than other voters. Compared to centrist voters, partisans are more politically active and communicate more often with candidates and officeholders, convey more detailed and plentiful information about their policy preferences, and are more homogeneous and therefore less likely to send conflicting signals. The result is an improvement in the accuracy and efficiency of politicians' efforts to identify their constituents' concerns and to respond to the preferences of partisans (Wright 1989; Fiorina 1974; Stone 1982).

The party voting model suggests, then, that politicians have strong incentives to enunciate and vote for policy positions that reflect the national parties' platforms. Compromising the party's policy goals to follow centrist opinion is quite costly. Politicians appreciate that the

risk of political retribution is higher when originating from organized, narrow factions with intense preferences and politically significant resources than from generalized public opinion: alienating party activists and elites may prompt them to support a more faithful party candidate or to withhold their financial contributions and willingness to volunteer.

Substantial research supports the party vote model. Fenno's (1978) observation of House members suggested that they were more interested in, placed more importance upon, and were more responsive to their "supportive constituency" of partisans than their other constituents. More sweeping quantitative research confirmed Fenno's finding. Parties and candidates displayed consistent and significant differences on policy issues that depart from (rather than converge toward) the preferences of centrist opinion (Ginsberg 1976; Page 1978; Wittman 1983; Poole and Rosenthal 1997).

Party constituencies generate (along with other factors) the differences among the legislative parties: party voting by the electorate as well as the actions of party activists and state party leaders induces legislators to follow the agenda of their party (Kingdon 1989; Ansolabehere 1998a; Fiorina 1974; Shapiro, Brady, Brody, and Ferejohn 1990; Aldrich 1995; Rohde 1991). One set of studies has established that senators from the same state but different parties compile different voting records corresponding to their different partisan constituencies (Wright 1989; Kingdon 1989; Rohde 1991). (Senators from the same state and the same party exhibit much less difference in voting behavior than senators as a whole.) The role of party voting by the electorate in generating legislative party differences is further confirmed by district-level analysis of House elections over a hundred-year period (Ansolabehere, Snyder, and Stewart 1998a). When challengers defeat incumbents, the ideological rating of the district's representation moves strongly toward the positions of the winner's national party. According to this analysis, voters choose between candidates who represent distinct national visions regarding the role of government. For instance, in all but two cases, Democratic House candidates represented a position to the "left" of the Republican candidates.

The Strategic Shirking Account

The second variant of the policy-oriented approach is the *strategic shirking account.* It suggests that presidents and legislators prefer to maximize their policy goals but only when there is an opportunity to shirk from the median voters' policy preferences *and* avoid electoral punishment (Kau and Rubin 1979; Kalt and Zupan 1984; Nelson and Silberberg 1987; for a review see Rasmussen 1989). They are strategic shirkers, pursuing policy goals but alert to the effects of policy positions on their chance of winning reelection; they seek to maximize the enactment of their desired policies and their likelihood of returning to office. In contrast to the median voter theory, this model suggests that the goals of politicians are not simply winning elections but also enacting policies more consistent with their objectives than those of median voters (Wittman 1990).

Politicians prefer to dodge centrist opinion in favor of their strong policy goals for four reasons:

1. The policy goals of partisans are important, though unlike the party voting model they constitute only one of several influences on politicians. Partisans not only devote their time and support in the process of candidate selection, but they also are an important source of campaign contributions.
2. Nearly all politicians harbor their own conceptions, attitudes, or ideological views about what is "good public policy." Presidents, for instance, pursue policy goals to ensure their "place in history" and to build long-term public support for themselves and their party (Cohen 1997). Personal policy beliefs and the desire to enact good policy are also significant influences on legislators, according to statistical analyses of congressional roll call voting and other evidence (Kingdon 1989; Levitt 1996; for a review see Bianco 1994, 36–37 and chap. 4).
3. Presidents and members of Congress are sensitive to the demands of interest groups that can mobilize particularistic groups within a legislator's constituency and use national political action committees to provide campaign contributions to politicians (Cigler and Loomis 1983). For example, Fenno's study found that House members worked to satisfy constituent groups who could turn out narrow blocs of loyal voters like letter carriers and their families (Fenno 1978; Stein and Bickers 1995).
4. Presidents and legislators weigh the positions of other officeholders due to party loyalty, perceptions of the national interest, and calculations of political expediency aimed at avoiding positions that are unpopular with partisans back home or contribute to perceptions of stalemate (Kingdon 1989; Bond and Fleisher 1990). For instance, Ronald Reagan's crusade to reduce taxes and spending won the sup-

port of a critical bloc of House Democrats during his first term because of shared policy goals. Bill Clinton benefited from party loyalty and the support of party activists in his efforts to unify congressional Democrats against the Republican drive to impeach him.

Formal models of electoral competition as well as empirical research suggest that politicians attempt to develop political strategies to achieve their electoral and policy goals. On the one hand, politicians (especially those who are intent on attracting centrist voters) recognize that reelection is necessary for continuing in office and that discounting centrist opinion puts reelection at risk. On the other hand, politicians are "not single minded seekers of election" (Arnold 1990, 5; Wittman 1983, 1990). "When electoral calculations yield no specific recommendation, legislators are free to pursue other goals" (Arnold 1990, 6).

Two distinct political strategies are critical, then, in enabling politicians to pursue policy goals independent of centrist opinion without unduly sacrificing their chances for reelection. First, presidents and legislators capitalize on or heighten the difficulty voters have both in monitoring the policy positions of their representatives and in disciplining them for not following their preferences. Donald Wittman (1983; 1990) suggests that politicians seize on the "bias" of voters toward evaluating candidates according to considerations other than policy positions, and electoral safety is one important source of bias that benefit politicians. Legislators at any level of government can capitalize on comfortable margins of election victory (greater than 55 percent) to depart from the policy preferences of centrist opinion in favor of their policy goals (Fiorina 1973; Ansolabehere 1998a; Kuklinski 1977; Kuklinski and Elling 1977; Hansen 1975; Sullivan and Uslaner 1978). Safe seats result both from the nature of constituencies (namely, the presence of proportionally large numbers of fellow partisans) as well as from the deliberate efforts of incumbents to secure voters' support and their trust by performing constituency service (e.g., providing government spending and programs to their districts) for which they can claim credit (Mayhew 1974a,b; Fiorina 1977; Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina 1987). According to one analysis, "trust gives a representative voting leeway, allowing her to act as she thinks best in light of her private information, without fear that her vote will damage her chances of reelection" (Bianco 1994, 23). Legislators are most likely to win trust when they persuade their constituents that they are acting in the common interest. Politicians in safe seats, then, can capitalize on their

advantageous strategic position to move closer to their preferred policy position and further from centrist opinion. Although only a relatively small subset of legislators serve marginal districts or states, it deserves emphasizing that an electorally safe seat offers only an opportunity, not unconstrained autonomy; incumbents are not "free" to do as they wish and are not immune from successful challenges (Kingdon 1989).

Even if voters evaluated representatives based on their policy positions, politicians appreciate that it is likely that voters will find it difficult to monitor and punish their representatives for any single vote. The sheer number and diversity of politicians' positions make it very difficult for voters to identify their representatives' positions on specific issues, clarify their own views, and decide if punishment is warranted (Page 1978). The result is to widen politicians' discretion in reaching decisions and shirking from centrist opinion.

In addition to capitalizing on favorable political conditions such as comfortable margins of reelection, politicians adopt deliberate strategies to diminish their chances of electoral punishment as they pursue their policy objectives. Leaders of coalitions committed to policy goals rely upon legislative rules and procedures both to obscure policy attributes that are likely to alienate median voters and to reassure their followers in Congress that their vote will not put their election at risk (Arnold 1990). In particular, coalition leaders package legislation in order to delay benefit reductions and tax hikes and to make it difficult for voters to trace the outcome of a policy decision back to a governmental action and then, in turn, to an individual legislator's vote. According to Arnold, the most effective and common strategy for deflecting the electoral threat of policy decisions focuses on legislative packaging and on national government officials and the relatively small group of Americans who are attentive to government decisions.

The second strategy politicians pursue to lower the electoral risk of shirking is to change public opinion. A critical assumption in the median voter model is that public preferences are fixed and candidates move toward centrist opinion. Officeholders facing reelection have only one strategic option: change their personal policy choices and abide by what centrist opinion favors. Neglected is the possibility that elites may attempt to change public opinion.

Benjamin Ginsberg (1986) suggests that governments and social scientists have over a long historical period redirected political participation from behavioral expressions (such as riots or strikes) to attitudinal manifestations and more passive behavioral expressions. (See also Herbst 1993.) Over the course of a century, Ginsberg argues, the sys-

tems of education and mass communications have reduced the diversity of ideas and homogenized public attitudes into a "docile," "plebiscitary" phenomenon (83). Although useful in highlighting the impact of elites on voters, Ginsberg's portrayal collapses the complex interplay of responsiveness and opinion manipulation to a single process (elite indoctrination) and neglects the strategic interaction of politicians and the mass public.

More helpful for our purposes is the analysis of legislators and presidents who attempt to move public opinion. Research indicates that politicians are uncertain about the future direction of public opinion and seize on this uncertainty as an opportunity to change public opinion rather than risk the political costs of discounting existing centrist opinion. Political leaders (presidents and legislators elected or appointed to influential leadership positions) are especially involved in attempting to change public opinion because of their superior resources and their particular incentives to achieve collective benefits such as promoting their party's reputation and establishing or maintaining their party's majority status in government office (Jacobs, Lawrence, Shapiro, and Smith 1998).

Fenno argues that House members rely on a "less policy-centered" style of representation and avoid the "substantive matter" of aligning "the policy preferences of the represented and the policy decisions of the representative." Instead, legislators use "the description, the interpretation and the justification of their behavior" to influence the evaluations and opinions of their constituents back home. Members rely on their "explanations" to "develo[p] the leeway for activity undertaken in Washington" and to build the "political support" to pursue their own policy goals (Fenno 1978, 136, 240–41, 244; Kingdon 1989).

Research on the presidency similarly emphasizes efforts to change public opinion, though on a national (rather than local) scale. Presidents face a growing number of constraints that frustrate their efforts to satisfy the demands placed on them and to fulfill their campaign promises (Neustadt 1980; Skowronek 1993; Shaw 1998; Pomper and Lederman 1976; Krukones 1984; Fishel 1985). Presidents rely on their popularity to offset the constraints on them and their office; greater presidential popularity expands their leverage in achieving their policy initiatives (especially in Congress).

Samuel Kernell (1986) argues that modern presidents have reacted to their debilitating environment of "individualized pluralism" by "going public" to augment their already scarce political resources. Their speeches and other public announcements provide a unique means to

boost public support for their proposals and, especially, their approval ratings, which in turn increase the electoral pressure on legislators and other Washingtonians to compromise with the president. In other words, presidents try to mobilize centrist opinion behind them and their proposals in order to construct a supportive coalition from an otherwise splintered set of political actors within Washington. (See also Lowi 1985; Peterson 1990.) In a similar vein, Jeffrey Tulis (1987) stresses that the norms of governance shifted from "inside-the-Beltway" deliberation among Washington's elites during the nineteenth century to the "rhetorical president" of the twentieth century who made appeals over the heads of legislators in order to build public support for them and pressure to enact their policies. Although research has focused on presidents' efforts to bolster their public approval and general political influence (Neustadt 1980; Brace and Hinckley 1992; Kernell 1986), we concentrate on presidential campaigns to alter public preferences and evaluations of specific policies.

Contributions and Limitations

The theory of policy-oriented motivations offers a corrective to the presumption in the strong responsiveness account that politicians passively register public demands. Instead, party voting and strategic shirking offer cogent explanations for how and why politicians discount centrist opinion in favor of policy goals. These accounts provide the starting point for investigating the political motivation underlying the declining responsiveness since the early 1970s. They also suggest a variety of elite strategies to minimize the electoral risk of pursuing policy objectives.

There are, however, two broad limitations with the policy-oriented account. It does not explain the comparatively elevated levels of responsiveness, as we have noted, in the decades before 1980. The policy-oriented perspective is ill-equipped to explain the *change* in the motivations of politicians toward responding to public opinion. In addition, it is hard-pressed to explain the *intermittent rises in responsiveness* as elections approach during periods in which responsiveness sags.

Second, the emphasis on politicians' strategies both to capitalize on the limits of voters' efforts to monitor them and to change public opinion is informative but incomplete in important ways. While there is a broad appreciation that changing public opinion can create "leeway" to pursue policy goals, this analysis does not directly connect variations in responsiveness with the changing motivation to alter public

opinion. How can the decline in responsiveness since the 1970s be incorporated in Kernell's analysis of "going public" or Fenno's investigation of "homestyle" representation? We will argue in the next chapter that the decline in responsiveness went hand-in-hand with systemic pressures on a variety of political actors to pursue a strategy of changing public opinion.

The political purpose of polling, focus groups, and other sources of information on public opinion is another incomplete aspect of the policy-oriented model. Casual observers of American politics infer that the enormous amount of research on public opinion is used by politicians for governing. But if policy-oriented politicians are shirking public opinion, why are they so interested in tracking it? Does the fact that politicians track public opinion undermine the claim that politicians are motivated by policy goals? Or, alternatively, do politicians respond to public opinion but not for the purposes of making government policy?

In addition, analysis of politicians' efforts to change public opinion (such as Fenno's and Kernell's) tend to treat the actions of legislators and presidents as discrete, isolated phenomena. Neglected is the fact that legislators (especially congressional leaders) and presidents are linked—they react to each other (Jacobs and Shapiro 1998; Harris 1998). The efforts of presidents to mobilize public support provoked legislative leaders to counterattack with their own national campaigns to "win" public opinion rather than to plod along with the decentralized, district-by-district efforts that Fenno describes.

Moreover, the policy-oriented perspective overlooks the focus of politicians on specific policies. Fenno concentrates on the "less policy-centered" efforts of legislators to change their constituents' perceptions and attitudes; Kernell and other students of the public presidency emphasize presidents' preoccupation with boosting their overall approval ratings. Neither of these accounts are wrong, but they are incomplete. The next chapter suggests that both the public opinion research that politicians conduct and their efforts to change public opinion concentrate on specific policies.

Furthermore, the effort of contemporary presidents and legislators to direct public opinion on salient policy issues is not simply an occasional option; it has become routine. Arnold, for instance, suggests that the manipulation of policy attributes in a legislative package to diminish potential voter retribution is more likely and effective than efforts to change public opinion. Politicians, though, do not perceive these two approaches—legislative packaging and the influencing of

opinion—as mutually exclusive. In an era of competitions among elites to change public opinion (Zaller 1992), legislators who seek to lower the electoral risks of pursuing policy goals are unlikely to rely simply on carefully designing the visible attributes of legislation and trusting that this will be self-evident to Americans. Rather, legislative leaders and others have strong incentives to actively manage public perceptions of salient proposals for new legislation in anticipation that rivals will counterattack and highlight costs (even if they are delayed) and diligently work to trace specific votes to unfavorable outcomes.

Conclusion

Overall, the strong responsiveness and policy-oriented models offer competing theoretical expectations regarding the relationship between public opinion and politicians. The former predicts that politicians perceive high personal benefits from adhering to centrist opinion and minimal costs from compromising their policy goals. By contrast, the latter expects politicians to perceive high personal benefits from pursuing their preferred policies while sizing up the electoral risks as manageable. The two perspectives differ, then, on whether the policy decisions of politicians are a means to reelection or an end in themselves (with elections merely the means to achieving policy goals).

The contribution of the strong responsiveness and policy-oriented models is to lay the foundation for building a theory to explain the changing motivations of politicians to respond to or discount public opinion. Two primary challenges remain. First, neither account explains the *variations* over time in politicians' responsiveness—its decline over the past two decades and its intermittent rises and falls during this period. Each account posits a set of fixed expectations regarding the motivations of politicians: politicians either defer to public preferences or they exercise their discretion to pursue policy goals. What is needed is a theory of political motivations that explains the changing priority that politicians assign to following centrist opinion. The challenge is to develop an explanation for variations over time in responsiveness that synthesizes both accounts.

Second, both accounts treat politicians' motivations as largely divorced from the mass media's coverage of politics and from the dynamics of public opinion. The calculations that politicians make to follow centrist opinion or to pursue their own policy goals need to be connected with the dynamics of media coverage and public opinion (and their feedback effect on politicians' behavior and strategy). We must

ask: What impact do the strategies of politicians have on media coverage and public opinion? How does public opinion and news reporting figure in the calculations of politicians?

The next chapter takes up the challenge of incorporating the contributions of the strong responsiveness and policy-oriented models into an account that explains the variations in responsiveness and the dynamics of political news coverage and public opinion.

Chapter Two

Crafted Talk and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness

Political motivations regarding electoral and policy goals are dynamic and vary in reaction to specific changes in political and institutional conditions. Since the 1970s, the growth of ideological polarization in Congress, of institutional independence of government officials, and of the advantages of incumbency have increased the benefits that politicians associate with seeking policy goals and discounting centrist opinion. The motivation to pursue policy objectives has encouraged politicians to adopt a strategy aimed at lowering the potential electoral costs of discounting centrist opinion: politicians craft how they present their policy stances in order to attract favorable press coverage and "win" public support for what they desire. We refer to this strategy as one of *crafted talk.* If public opinion does not change in the desired direction, politicians change their behavior with the imminent approach of presidential elections by temporarily increasing their responsiveness to centrist opinion even if it requires compromising their policy objectives.

Politicians' pursuit of policy goals and the strategy of crafted talk affect not only policymaking but also how the mass media cover politics and what Americans think about politics and government. We suggest that competition by politicians to fulfill their policy objectives and to attempt to change public opinion generates media coverage that focuses on political conflict and strategy. How the public perceives this polarized policy struggle (as conveyed by the press) increases its uncertainty about policy change and the sense of individuals that their personal well-being is threatened. As a result, the public concludes that