

CHAPTER TEN

It Feels Like We're Thinking: The Rationalizing Voter

Every voter is more or less attracted or repelled by some political party, and usually to such an extent that he is unable to form an entirely unbiased judgment either on questions of policy or on the merits of candidates.

—A. Lawrence Lowell, *Public Opinion and Popular Government*
(1913, 86)

The primary use of party is to create public opinion.

—Philip C. Friese, *An Essay on Party* (1856, 7)

The primary sources of partisan loyalties and voting behavior, in our account, are social identities, group attachments, and myopic retrospections, not policy preferences or ideological principles. We showed in the previous chapter that particular identities—being a Catholic, a white southerner, or a woman—may have dramatic effects on party identification or on the choice of a candidate in an election. When political events make a particular identity salient or threatened, powerful psychological forces can be evoked, with effects that go well beyond the impact of the issues involved.

In this chapter we take up the most important political identity of all, party identification. Partisan loyalty is a common, uniquely powerful feature of mass political behavior in most established democracies.¹ The importance

¹ We recognize that the classic University of Michigan version of the concept (Campbell et al. 1960, chaps. 6–7) is not applicable everywhere. However, the complexities involved in applying the American concept of party identification in other settings are irrelevant to our argument here. For example, during particular periods in some countries, party names were in flux, and the party system was instead primarily organized around support for a particular

of party identification reflects the fact that—unlike particular social identities, which may come and go as electoral forces—partisanship is relevant in nearly all elections. It shapes voting behavior, of course. But beyond that, each party organizes the thinking of its adherents. A party constructs a conceptual viewpoint by which its voters can make sense of the political world. Sympathetic newspapers, magazines, websites, and television channels convey the framework to partisans. That framework identifies friends and enemies, it supplies talking points, and it tells people how to think and what to believe. Thus, unlike particular social identities tied to the special interests of groups, the reach of partisanship is very broad. For the voters who identify with a party, partisanship pulls together conceptually nearly every aspect of electoral politics.

Once inside the conceptual framework, the voter finds herself inhabiting a relatively coherent universe. Her preferred candidates, her political opinions, and even her view of the facts will all tend to go together nicely. The arguments of the “other side,” if they get any attention at all, will seem obviously dismissible. The fact that none of the opinions propping up her party loyalty are really hers will be quite invisible to her. It will feel like she’s thinking.

Even among unusually well-informed and politically engaged people, the political preferences and judgments that look and feel like the bases of partisanship and voting behavior are, in reality, often *consequences* of party and group loyalties. In fact, the more information the voter has, often the better able she is to bolster her identities with rational-sounding reasons. All the appropriate partisan chimes will be rung, and the voter may sound quite impressive. Converse (1964) might put her at the top of his informational pyramid and anoint her as an “ideologue.” But she may be just as impervious to evidence as anyone else, as the everyday connotation of the word “ideologue” suggests.

This fundamental disjuncture between our subjective experience of thinking about the political world and the reality of group and party influences on us is a testament to the remarkable ability of human beings to misconstrue the bases of our own attitudes and behavior. As Wendy Rahn, Jon Krosnick, and Marijke Breuning (1994, 592) wrote, summarizing the voluminous

leader or opposition to him, such as Charles de Gaulle in France or Juan Perón in Argentina. In South Korea, the same parties continue in political life, but they change their names at every presidential election. But in all these cases, most voters have had little trouble finding “their party” and staying loyal to it at most elections. For our purposes, such systems have “party identification” in the sense that we use the term.

psychological literature on this point, “when asked to explain their preferences, people are biased toward mentioning reasons that sound rational and systematic and that emphasize the object being evaluated, while overlooking more emotional reasons and factors other than the object’s qualities.” In other words, “people *rationalize* their pre-existing preferences.”

In this chapter we examine the psychology of political belief-construction and its implications for democratic citizenship. We focus on party identification, in part because of its ubiquity in elections, and in part because the evidence for its political effects is far broader and deeper than for the impact of any other identity. Thus we can give far more extensive evidence for its effect than was available for any one of our examples in the previous chapter. Indeed, the evidence is overwhelming. We find that partisan loyalties strongly color citizens’ views about candidates, issues, and even “objective” facts. Citizens’ political preferences and beliefs are constructed from emotional or cognitive commitments whose real bases lie elsewhere. We take up three different aspects of partisan beliefs—perceptions of where the parties stand on issues, beliefs about purely factual matters in politics, and the ricochet effect on other issues when an exogenous shock moves partisanship.

PARTISAN PERCEPTION AND MISPERCEPTION

An important function of partisan rationalization is to minimize “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger 1957)—in this case, the unpleasant feeling that candidates of my party do not share my issue preferences. In the face of that discrepancy, one way to feel better is to change my mind and adopt my party’s position, as men often do with respect to abortion policy (see chapter 9). But an even simpler route to relief is to ignore or resist learning my party’s views, and to imagine that their opinions are the same as my own. This phenomenon of “cognitive balancing” is far more common than many political observers realize.

For example, a question about the trade-off between taxes and government services has been asked repeatedly in American National Election Studies (ANES) surveys since 1982.² Respondents are asked to place themselves on a seven-point scale ranging from “many more services” on the left to “reduce

2. “Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel that it is important for the government to provide many more services even if it means an increase in spending. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven’t you thought much about this?”

spending a lot" on the right. They are also asked to place the two political parties on the same scale. This allows a researcher to calculate how close the respondent thinks each party is to her own position on the issue. Suppose that on the seven-point scale, a respondent sees the GOP as one unit away from her own position and the Democrats as four units away. Then we will say that she favors the Republicans by three points, which is the difference in those two distances. We refer to differences of this kind as "issue proximities." If the respondent sees herself as closer to the Republicans, our measure of relative issue proximity is coded as a positive number; if she sees herself as closer to the Democrats, the resulting issue proximity score is coded as a negative number.

Data of that kind allow a simple test of whether voters are engaged in rationalizing how close their party is to their own views. To see this, suppose that no rationalization were occurring. Then consider a Democrat and a Republican, both of whom placed themselves at 2 on a 7-point scale. If they both see the parties accurately, they will each be exactly the same distance from each party, and thus they will each have exactly the same relative issue proximity. Their partisanship should be irrelevant. On the other hand, if rationalization is occurring, each respondent may perceive her own party as closer to her than it really is, and perhaps also perceive the other party as further away than it is. Thus Republican respondents will pull their proximities upward toward the positive numbers favoring the GOP, while Democrats will pull theirs downward toward negative numbers that favor their party.

Over the years, more than 22,000 ANES survey respondents have been asked this question. About 15% of those people declined to place themselves on the scale—they said they didn't know or "hadn't thought much about" the central domestic policy issue of the past three decades. Another 14% placed themselves on the scale but declined to place one or both of the political parties. Thus, despite the centrality of this issue in contemporary partisan debate, about 30% of the public could not possibly make a calculation of relative "issue proximity" of the sort taken for granted in the spatial model of voting described in chapter 2.

But what of the remaining 70%? Figure 10.1 provides a simple tabulation of Republicans' and Democrats' perceptions of relative issue proximity—which major party was closer to their own position—on the taxing and spending question. The figure shows the average perception of relative proximity for Republican and Democratic partisans at each point on the issue scale.

If respondents' perceptions of the parties' issue positions were unbiased, the curves in figure 10.1 for Republican and Democratic identifiers would overlap perfectly. Instead, they are markedly divergent. Among the 24% of

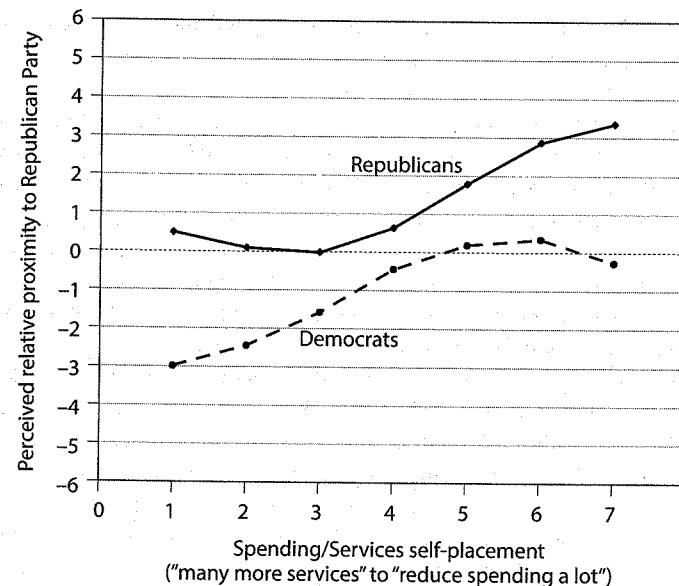


Figure 10.1. Party Identification and Perceptions of Issue Proximity for Spending/Services, 1982–2012

these respondents in figure 10.1 who placed themselves in the middle of the seven-point issue scale, Republicans and Democrats differed by a full point in their assessments of issue proximity.³ That is, Republicans believed their party was more than half a point closer to the middle of the scale, on average, while Democrats believed *their* party was almost half a point closer to the same midpoint. Obviously, both could not be right.⁴

The partisan disparities were even larger for people whose own positions did not happen to fall at the midpoint of the seven-point scale. Liberal Democrats (on the left) and conservative Republicans (on the right) each quite

³ With 2,803 partisan identifiers who placed themselves at the middle of the scale, the *t*-statistic for this difference is 25.6; the customary standard for "statistical significance" is 1.96.

⁴ In principle, Republicans could have been right in some years and Democrats in other years. However, allowing for movement in the actual positions of the parties on the spending and services scale by adding year-specific intercepts to the analysis does very little to alter the picture; the partisan difference in perceived proximity is virtually unchanged.

sensibly saw themselves as closer to their own party, and increasingly so as their own positions became more extreme. However, people whose own positions did not match their party's—liberal Republicans on the left and conservative Democrats on the right—were entirely impervious to the implications of that fact for issue proximity.⁵ Liberal Republicans managed to convince themselves that the Republican Party was just as close to them as the Democratic Party was; conservative Democrats were equally adept at convincing themselves that the Democratic Party was just as close to them as the Republican Party was. Again, we need not stipulate where the parties “really” stood on the issue of government spending and services to see that *someone's* perceptions have gone badly astray here.

Thus, once again, we find that group identities drive views of the political world. For many voters, party loyalty determines how they see the parties' issue positions—the exact opposite of how the folk theory and its derivatives, like the spatial theory of voting, imagine that voters behave. These misperceptions have consequences. For example, the strong tendency of partisans to exaggerate the relative proximity of their favored party's issue positions to their own may contribute significantly to the failure of the American electorate to pull increasingly polarized parties back to the ideological center in the manner posited by the spatial model of elections (Sood and Iyengar 2014).

Figure 10.1 is no isolated example.⁶ Indeed, for more than half a century students of public opinion and voting behavior have been documenting the role of party and group loyalties in shaping political perceptions. For example, Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee (1954, chap. 10) were among the first to show that partisanship colored perceptions of candidates' issue positions.

In the light of this well-verified finding, some scholars have proposed formal models of how the perceptual process works. Henry Brady and Paul

5 Given the political salience of government spending and services in this era, only 20% of Republican identifiers and 15% of Democratic identifiers took positions on the issue contrary to those conventionally assigned to their respective parties (while 46% of Republicans took positions to the right of the midpoint and 44% of Democrats took positions to the left of the midpoint). Dissonance between partisanship and issue positions has been more common on most of the other issues included in the ANES surveys.

6 Not every issue produces errors in perception as large as those displayed in figure 10.1. On the issue of abortion, for example, most pro-choice Republicans and (by a narrower margin) most pro-life Democrats have managed to recognize that their views put them closer to the opposing party than to their own party. However, analogous figures for most of the issues included in ANES surveys over the years look much more similar to the pattern for spending and services presented in figure 10.1 than to the pattern for abortion. Partisan misperception is the rule, not the exception.

Sniderman (1985) proposed that people's attributions of policy positions to political groups balanced two distinct psychological objectives: a desire for accuracy and “a strain to consistency” between perceptions and feelings (Brady and Sniderman 1985, 1068). On one hand, people were assumed to want to be accurate in their perception of where a group actually stood. On the other hand, if they liked the group, they wanted its views to be near their own; and if they disliked it, they wanted its views to be far away from theirs. As a result, actual perceptions represented weighted averages of the group's actual and hoped-for positions, with the weights reflecting the relative psychological importance of accuracy and cognitive consistency.

Models like that proposed by Brady and Sniderman are non-rational. They take account of the extensive empirical evidence that people value certain kinds of inaccuracy because adopting those fallacious perceptions makes them feel better. However, another explanatory tradition has arisen in which the same people are seen as perfectly rational, but simply poorly informed. Long ago, A. Lawrence Lowell (1913, 87) observed that “for a man to follow blindly in national politics a national party that he has learned to trust is not wholly without justification, because there is a strong chance that it stands for the opinions he would himself hold if he studied the issues involved.” Thus *partisan inference* is an effort by citizens to “fill in the blanks” using what they do know (their views about the parties) to make plausible guesses about what they do not know (where candidates stand on the issues). On this view, using parties to infer issue proximities is completely sensible.

In this rational spirit, Stanley Feldman and Pamela Conover (1983) proposed “an inference model of political perception.” They noted that the patterns of rationalization typically interpreted as reflecting cognitive dissonance reduction could also be interpreted as rational inferences in the face of uncertainty: “Rather than being motivated by a need to reduce inconsistency, people may simply learn that certain aspects of the social and political world are, in fact, constructed in a consistent fashion . . . In the absence of information to the contrary, an individual's assumption that certain types of consistency exist may be an efficient way of perceiving the world.”

Feldman and Conover (1983, 813) argued that “a theoretical focus on cognitive inference provides more than just a reinterpretation of consistency effects; it suggests a basis for developing a more general explanation of political perception.” Their more general explanation involved accounting for perceptions of candidates' issue stands by reference to a variety of plausibly relevant political cues, including respondents' own issue positions and their perceptions of political parties and ideological groups. In subsequent work

(Conover and Feldman 1989), they put a similar framework to good effect in accounting for the crystallization of perceptions of Democratic presidential candidate Jimmy Carter over the course of the 1976 campaign. Using repeated interviews with the same people over the course of the election year, they showed that most people were quite uncertain of Carter's issue positions during the primary season, but shifted markedly toward associating him with the positions of the Democratic Party after he became the Democratic nominee.

But how much comfort should we take from this rationalistic reinterpretation of voter errors? Perceptual biases may be "efficient" in the sense of minimizing psychological stress. If I am a Democrat who favors cutting spending, my customary Democratic vote will engender no unease; I can manage to convince myself that Barack Obama is just as committed as I am to cutting spending. The result may even represent a "reasonable response to ambiguity," as Feldman and Conover (1983, 837) put it—at least, for someone who has paid no attention to Obama's statements and actions over the course of his presidency or to party platforms or policies over the past three decades. But we see no reason to suppose that it is conducive to effective electoral democracy.

As we have seen, the same pervasive impact of partisanship on the perceived issue positions of the parties can be interpreted as either cognitive balancing or partisan inference. For the purposes of our argument, this is a distinction without a difference. In this chapter, as elsewhere in this volume, we resist getting too caught up in debates about the specific psychological mechanisms underlying people's political preferences and beliefs. Much of the best contemporary work in the field of political psychology focuses on "powerful affective and cognitive forces that motivate and direct deliberation and political action outside of conscious awareness and control" (Lodge and Taber 2013, 1; see also see Payne et al. 2010; Pérez 2010; Albertson 2011; Erisen, Lodge, and Taber 2014).⁷ From that perspective, a subconscious impulse to minimize cognitive dissonance seems like a pretty good bet to be the central force at work. However, as Feldman and Conover observed, it is quite possible to account for essentially similar patterns of preference and belief on

the basis of the more stylized assumptions underlying rational choice theory (Achen and Bartels 2006; Lauderdale 2012).

As with the broader literature on political cues and heuristics surveyed in chapter 2, the literature on partisan perception generally conveys a good deal of enthusiasm for the "efficiency," "consistency," "reasonableness," and "rationality" of whatever it is that citizens are doing. For example, despite important differences in their theoretical perspectives, Feldman and Conover (1983) and Brady and Sniderman (1985) seemed similarly heartened by the implications of their findings for electoral democracy. Feldman and Conover (1983, 837) concluded that voters "do the best they can," and that "the general contribution of inference processes to vote choice is a positive one." For their part, Brady and Sniderman (1985, 1075) concluded that "affect can be a quite efficient way of encoding and storing what is after all the most vital political information: who and what one is for or against."

Efficient, perhaps. What is striking, though, is that Brady and Sniderman had very little to say about the implications of this efficiency for the *accuracy* of people's perceptions of the political landscape. At one point (1985, 1076) they asserted that "the mass public is remarkably accurate in attributing positions to strategic groups on major issues"; but that assertion seems to have referred to the *average* attributions of the public as a whole rather than to the judgments of any particular individual. In any case, it is unclear what contribution, if any, their "likeability heuristic" made to the accuracy of the issue perceptions they examined.

Brady and Sniderman's results from 34 separate statistical analyses, each focusing on perceptions of a particular group on a particular issue, suggested that people's perceptions of disliked groups were relatively accurate, on average, but that their perceptions of favored groups were strongly biased by their desire to see those groups as close to themselves. Indeed, for a typical favored group, people's *own* issue positions received about one-third as much weight as the group's *actual* position in shaping perceptions of where the group stood.⁸ And this was for perceptions of very salient groups—liberals

⁷ The subtitle of this chapter is an accidental homage to Lodge and Taber's book, *The Rationalizing Voter*, which examined specific psychological mechanisms of political attitude formation in considerable detail. The same phrase appeared independently in the subtitle of the 2006 conference paper from which this chapter derives and in the title of a 2007 conference paper by Lodge and Taber subsequently incorporated into their book.

⁸ Brady and Sniderman's model included two terms measuring projection: a "false consensus" effect applying to all groups regardless of whether they were liked or disliked, and a "more focused, or partisan, effect" pulling perceptions of favored groups toward one's own position and pushing perceptions of disfavored groups away from that position. The average magnitudes of Brady and Sniderman's statistical estimates were .185 for the false consensus effect and .550 for the differential projection effect. Assuming a difference of 25 points between favored and disfavored groups on the ANES feeling thermometer (roughly the observed average difference between the groups Brady and Sniderman considered), the combined effect is

and conservatives, blacks and whites, Republicans and Democrats—on major political issues of the day. It seems safe to assume that projection effects would loom even larger for less familiar groups or candidates and for less prominent issues.

Indeed, an analysis along similar lines of perceived issue positions of candidates in presidential primaries (Bartels 1988, 98–107) did find even larger projection effects, especially early in the primary season and for candidates who were relatively unknown. For example, Democrats in the 1984 primary campaign perceived well-known frontrunner Walter Mondale as about 20% closer, on average, to their own issue positions than he really was; but the corresponding distortion for little-known challenger Gary Hart was about 40% at the beginning of the campaign, only gradually declining to a similar 20% level. For people who were particularly enthusiastic about Hart, for whatever reason, the estimated projection effect was even larger. People who gave Hart the warmest possible rating on a 100-point “feeling thermometer” at the beginning of the primary season managed to see him as almost 75% closer than he actually was to their own issue positions.

Thus, voters may “do the best they can,” as Feldman and Conover insisted, but still be depressingly far from having realistic perceptions of the political world. Their patent inaccuracy seems to us to belie the “encouraging” conclusion that “the general contribution of inference processes to vote choice is a positive one” (Feldman and Conover 1983, 837).⁹

OUR OWN FACTS

Thus far we have seen that voters use their own preferences and their partisanship to help construct their ideas of what the parties stand for. That is bad enough. But it gets worse: They use their partisanship to construct “objective” facts, too, as we now demonstrate.

minimal for disfavored groups (+.05) but considerable for favored groups (+.31) by comparison with the effect of groups’ actual positions, which is normalized to 1.0.

⁹ Of course, the effects of partisan inference will be even less “encouraging” if partisan surmise crowds out real information. Wendy Rahn’s (1993) experimental study of the role of partisan stereotypes in information processing suggests that it does. She found that in the absence of party labels, voters furnished with “particular information” about candidates’ policy stands used that information in evaluating candidates and making inferences about their issue positions. “However, when voters have both particular information and party stereotypes available . . . they prefer to rely on heuristic-based processing. They neglect policy information in reaching evaluations; they use the label rather than policy attributes in drawing inferences; and they are perceptually less responsive to inconsistent information” (Rahn 1993, 492).

“Everyone is entitled to his own opinions,” Daniel Patrick Moynihan is supposed to have said, “but not to his own facts.” In the folk theory of democracy, objective facts about the political world transcend whatever disagreements arise from our differing moral commitments. Thus, in principle, people with differing policy views may nonetheless come to agreement regarding matters of fact—for example, that raising the minimum wage increases unemployment (or not), that crime is on the rise (or not), that a foreign adversary possesses weapons of mass destruction (or not)—and agreement about relevant facts may in turn contribute to reaching agreement about whether to raise the minimum wage, build more prisons, or invade Iraq.

Of course, people do not know all the facts that would be relevant to know about the political world. Nonetheless, the folk theory tells us, they can *learn* what they need to know in order to translate their moral commitments into cogent political preferences and effective political action. Indeed, on this view, the surest route to democratic improvement is to increase the level of political engagement and awareness among ordinary citizens. The implicit epistemology of the folk theory comes straight from the 18th-century Enlightenment, as we have seen.

One obvious problem with all of this, as we remarked in chapter 2, is the sheer magnitude of most people’s ignorance about politics. Another, slightly less obvious problem—as Jennifer Hochschild and Katherine Einstein (2015, vii) suggested, channeling Will Rogers or Mark Twain or Satchel Paige (actually, Josh Billings)—is how much they *do* know that ain’t so. Political misinformation has many potential sources, but prominent among them are the same processes of partisan perception we have found at work in the realm of political issues.

For example, the 1988 ANES survey asked respondents whether, “compared to 1980, the level of inflation in the country has gotten better, stayed about the same, or gotten worse.” The correct answer to this question was clearly “much better”—the inflation rate had fallen from 13.5% in 1980 to 4.1% in 1988. Almost half (47%) of “strong” Republicans gave that correct answer, while only 13% said inflation had gotten worse. However, fewer than 8% of “strong” Democrats acknowledged that inflation had gotten “much better” on President Reagan’s watch, while more than half claimed that it had gotten worse (Bartels 2002a).

Mistaken beliefs, even about highly salient facts, can persist over long periods of time. More than 18 months after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, for example, 47% of Republicans (but only 9% of Democrats) said they believed that Iraq had possessed weapons of mass destruction on the eve of the

invasion; 71% of Republicans (but only 37% of Democrats) believed that Iraq was directly involved in the 9/11 attacks or had provided substantial support to al-Qaeda. Another 18 months later, both of these beliefs had eroded, but only slightly: 41% of Republicans (and 7% of Democrats) still believed that Iraq had had weapons of mass destruction, while 63% of Republicans (and 35% of Democrats) still believed that Iraq was linked to al-Qaeda (Program on International Policy Attitudes 2006).¹⁰

Partisan bias may even creep into *interpretations* of agreed-upon facts. Thus, Brian Gaines and his colleagues (2007) found in a series of repeated interviews with college students in late 2003 and 2004 that “all partisan groups, strong Republicans included, held reasonably accurate beliefs” about the Iraq War and updated those beliefs as circumstances changed; however, Democratic and Republican students differed greatly in their *interpretations* of pertinent facts, causing the authors to conclude that partisans “effectively used interpretations to rationalize their existing opinions” rather than to rationally revise those opinions (Gaines et al. 2007, 961, 969).

Why do people adopt such different views even about straightforward matters of judgment? On one hand, just as a desire to minimize cognitive dissonance may lead people to adopt their preferred party’s issue positions as their own, it may lead them to adopt their preferred party’s views about whether the crime rate is rising or falling. On the other hand, people may be doing the best they can. After all, very few politically consequential facts are subject to direct, personal verification. Just as Lowell’s (1913, 87) rational partisan was “not wholly without justification” in guessing that his preferred party “stands for the opinions he would himself hold if he studied the issues involved,” he may be justified in guessing that his preferred party’s accepted views about factual controversies of the day are more likely than not to be the views he would himself come to if he devoted significant time and attention to those matters. In either case, the result will be a marked tendency toward partisan consistency in the realm of political beliefs, just as in the realm of political attitudes. But the dangers of this kind of thinking should be even more obvious where facts are concerned than they are with respect to other kinds of political perceptions.

¹⁰ Gary Jacobson (2008) cited even larger partisan disparities in responses to similar questions in CBS News/*New York Times* polls in late 2004 and early 2005: around 80% of Republicans, but fewer than 40% of Democrats, said that Iraq had possessed weapons of mass destruction.

People’s factual judgments are often cobbled together from various more or less pertinent and trustworthy sources, including news accounts, water-cooler conversation, campaign propaganda, and folk wisdom about the way the world works. In some cases, accurate information will trump partisanship, and the most engaged and politically aware citizens will have the firmest hold on reality, just as the folk theory of democracy would lead us to expect. Thus, many observers assume that “rationalization is probably greater for less informed citizens” (Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989, 132). However, Danielle Shani’s analysis of responses to a wide variety of factual questions produced a good deal of evidence to the contrary, leading her to conclude that “political knowledge does not correct for partisan bias in perception of ‘objective’ conditions, nor does it mitigate the bias. Instead, and unfortunately, it enhances the bias; party identification colors the perceptions of the most politically informed citizens far more than the relatively less informed citizens” (Shani 2006, 31).¹¹

How should we understand these patterns? If we follow Lowell (1913) or Feldman and Conover (1983) in trying to make sense of voters’ thinking as rational inference, we might begin with a formal model of fully rational decision-making. Elsewhere (Achen and Bartels 2006) we have developed a model of just that sort. It implies that citizens’ opinions represent weighted averages of three distinct quantities—first, background opinions representing what they already “know” before encountering any specific information about an issue (in the terminology of Bayesian decision-making, a *prior belief*); second, what they hear from party leaders and co-partisans or infer from their own partisanship; and third, actual factual knowledge regarding the matter at hand. The relative weight of these three quantities for any given citizen will depend upon the reliability of her information about them, which is determined in turn by her levels of political information and experience.¹²

¹¹ Shani analyzed eight factual questions in the 2000 ANES survey, including the budget deficit and national economy questions examined here. In seven of the eight cases she found substantial (and statistically significant) increases in partisan bias among well-informed respondents. These differences were largely unaffected by the introduction of statistical controls for differing political values or plausible demographic correlates of differing personal experiences.

¹² As is commonly the case in Bayesian learning models of this sort (Achen 1992), weighting each of these three factors by its reliability produces complex nonlinear relationships between political information and experience (for which our proxy is age) and observed judgments within each partisan group. Thus, our model implies that one should not generally expect to find linear relationships between “cues” and judgments, or between levels of political information and the extent of partisan bias in perceptions.

Citizens who are very sure of the facts will base their judgments largely on those facts. Those who know only the partisan talking points will parrot their party's view or simply assume that if the other party is in office, the times must be bad. And those who know neither the facts nor the party line will tend to formulate guesses based on folk wisdom about "how things always are" or other aspects of the prevailing zeitgeist.

Here, we illustrate the application of this model to the study of objective factual beliefs using responses to a question in the 1996 ANES survey asking whether "the size of the yearly budget deficit increased, decreased, or stayed about the same during Clinton's time as President?" The question is straightforwardly factual. It would be very hard to argue that Republicans and Democrats had different views about the meaning of the phrase "yearly budget deficit" or different standards for assessing whether the deficit had increased or decreased. Thus, any difference in responses must logically be attributable to some process of rationalization or partisan inference rather than to differences in ideologies or values.

Moreover, the actual trend in the budget deficit was remarkably clear and politically salient in 1996. The deficit had increased substantially under Bill Clinton's Republican predecessor, George H. W. Bush, and Ross Perot had made it the centerpiece of his historic independent presidential campaign in 1992.¹³ However, once Clinton became president in 1993 the deficit began to fall steadily and substantially—from \$255 billion in FY 1993 to \$203 billion in FY 1994, \$164 billion in FY 1995, and \$107 billion in FY 1996. Thus, the correct answer was clearly that the budget deficit had decreased a lot during Clinton's first term.¹⁴ The president trumpeted this success on the campaign

¹³ Perot supporters in 1992 were very likely to express concern about the budget deficit. However, this too was in large part a matter of rationalization. In the 1990 ANES survey, the same people who would later become Perot supporters were only slightly more likely than other people to express concern about the budget deficit; their concern seems to have been a consequence of Perot's campaign as much as it was a reason to support him (Zaller and Hunt 1995).

¹⁴ The federal fiscal year ends on September 30, and official annual deficit figures are released in late October. However, the fact that the budget deficit was continuing to decline rapidly in FY 1996 was clear well before the end of the fiscal year (and before the ANES survey got under way in September). For example, the Congressional Budget Office had estimated in its August update of "The Economic and Budget Outlook" that the FY 1996 deficit would be \$116 billion, almost 30% lower than in FY 1995 and 55% lower than in FY 1993 (<https://.cbo.gov/sites/default/files/cbofiles/ftpdocs/0xx/doc1/cb08-96.pdf>).

Table 10.1. Perceptions of the Budget Deficit by Party Identification, 1996

	1992 Democrats (%)	1992 Independents (%)	1992 Republicans (%)	Total (%)
Increased a lot (-50)	6.7	15.8	22.6	14.8
Increased a little (-25)	25.6	22.1	29.7	25.2
Stayed about the same (0)	28.5	29.7	23.5	27.7
Decreased a little (+25)	32.0	24.2	20.4	25.6
Decreased a lot (+50)	7.3	8.1	3.8	6.7
N	185	235	156	576

"Would you say that the size of the yearly budget deficit increased, decreased, or stayed about the same during Clinton's time as President? Would you say it has increased [decreased] a lot or a little?"

trail, while congressional Republicans demanded their share of the credit for the "common-sense belt-tightening" in Washington (Richter 1996).

Despite the clarity, salience, media coverage, and political significance of the declining budget deficit, the improvement in the nation's fiscal health went nearly unnoticed by the public. Information about it was highly concentrated among the best-informed people. The result was widespread public misperception of a fundamental fact about American politics and public policy. The summary of survey responses presented in table 10.1 shows that only one-third of the public recognized that the deficit had decreased, while 40% said it had increased. Republicans were especially inaccurate; more than half said that the deficit had increased, while only one-fourth said that it had decreased. This evidence of partisan bias is consistent with the findings of a good deal of previous research on perceptions and evaluations of political figures, issues, and conditions (Fischle 2000; Bartels 2002a; 2002b; Erikson 2004; Gerber and Huber 2010; Hetherington, Long, and Rudolph 2014). In

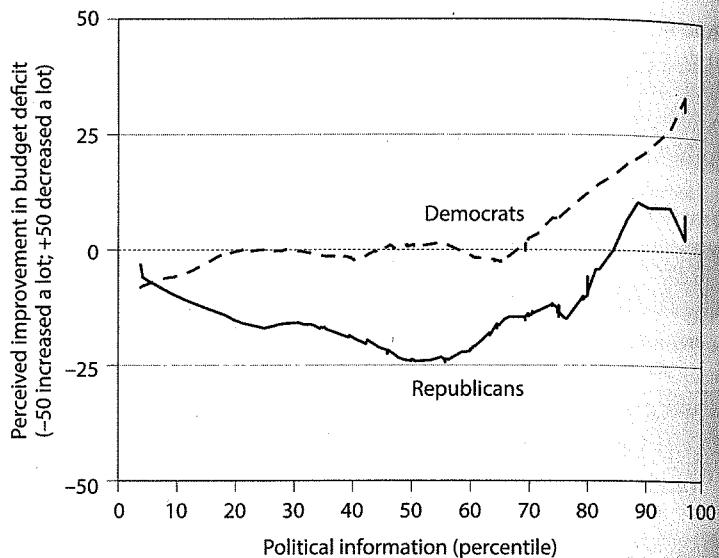


Figure 10.2. Perceptions of Budget Deficit by Party and Information Level, 1996

this case, however, even most Democrats were quite wrong, with fewer than 10% recognizing that the deficit had decreased a lot.¹⁵

Figure 10.2 traces the role of political information in shaping these perceptions of the budget deficit.¹⁶ Among the least well-informed respondents, neither objective reality nor partisan bias seems to have provided much structure to perceptions of the budget deficit. Uninformed Republicans and Democrats were slightly, and about equally, more likely to say that the deficit

15 We categorize people as Democrats or Republicans based on partisan attachments expressed in 1992, before Clinton even took office—thus ruling out the possibility that their partisanship was somehow an *effect* rather than a *cause* of their perceptions about how the budget deficit had changed on Clinton's watch.

16 The curves presented in figure 10.2 are derived from locally weighted (lowess) regressions using 30% of the data (50–60 survey responses) at each point along the information scale. Our measure of political information cumulates responses to a variety of factual questions (identifying prominent political figures, knowing which party controlled Congress, and so on) in each wave of the 1992–1996 ANES survey. Classifying respondents on the basis of party identification measured in 1996 produces very similar curves, suggesting that parallel analyses with cross-sectional data are unlikely to go too far astray in this case.

had increased than that it had decreased. Perhaps this tendency reflected a murky understanding that the budget deficit increased at some point in the past; perhaps it was a bit of prejudice based on folk wisdom about profligate politicians.

The beliefs of somewhat better-informed Republicans and Democrats did diverge significantly. However, among people in the bottom two-thirds of the national distribution of political information, this partisan divergence was entirely attributable to moderately informed Republicans being *less* likely than the least-informed to give the correct answer to the budget deficit question. They knew that a Democrat was in office and that the president was in some way responsible for the deficit. They did not know the actual progress of the deficit, but they did know that Democrats do a poor job by their standards. They inferred that Clinton was probably doing a poor job on the deficit, too.

Thus a modicum of political information was enough for Republicans to figure out what ought to be true, but not to learn what was in fact true. They were likely to recognize the partisan relevance of a factual question of this sort, and to answer it in decidedly partisan terms. Partisanship is likely to trump reality in this way when the issue, however vital, is the least bit arcane or divorced from personal experience, as in the case of the budget deficit.

The best-informed Republicans presumably had as much or more stake in resisting the notion that a Democratic president had produced a dramatic improvement in the deficit. However, they were also much more likely to have been exposed to objective information about the dramatic downward trend in the deficit. The result was a substantial uptick in recognition of the improved deficit situation among the best-informed Republicans—though even they were only slightly more likely to say that the deficit had decreased than that it had increased.

In contrast, well-informed Democrats—untroubled by any contradiction between the reality and their partisan hopes or expectations—were very likely to recognize at least some improvement in the budget deficit. However, it is worth noting that “well-informed” in this case refers to just the best-informed quarter or so of the citizenry. More typical Democrats, in the middle third of the distribution, were no more likely to say that the deficit had decreased than to say that it had increased.¹⁷

17 We also investigated another question from the same survey asking respondents whether “over the past year the nation’s economy has gotten better, stayed the same or gotten worse.” This is the question most frequently employed in individual-level analyses of

Again, our point is *not* that citizens are irrational. Indeed, our formal model of partisan inference (Achen and Bartels 2006) gives rationality every benefit of the doubt by assuming that people make perfectly rational use of whatever information they happen to have. That model, applied to the budget deficit question, reproduces the nonlinear patterns in figure 10.2 very well, and it predicts that moderately informed Republicans will be the group most likely to be mistaken, just as figure 10.2 demonstrates. Thus the problem is not that voters are necessarily irrational, but that most voters have very little real information, even about crucially important aspects of national political life. Thus, even when they “do the best they can,” as Feldman and Conover (1983, 837) put it, their beliefs on issues like the deficit are likely to be made up in large part of folk wisdom and partisan supposition. That is, partisanship shapes people’s worldviews in a deep way, right down to “their own facts.”

THE RAMIFICATIONS OF A PARTISAN SHOCK: REACTIONS TO WATERGATE

Our account of partisan perception implies that people’s political views and factual judgments are likely to be significantly and pervasively influenced by their partisan predispositions. Thus far, however, we have ignored the *process* by which preferences and perceptions come into equilibrium. As with any snapshot of an individual’s political views at a single point in time, the evidence we have presented thus far is consistent with a variety of distinct dynamic processes whose theoretical and normative implications may be quite different.

Carefully designed experiments may shed light on these alternative dynamic processes.¹⁸ So, too, may repeated observations of people exposed to real political change. However, considerable care is required to provide cogent

retrospective economic voting (e.g., Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Duch and Stevenson 2008). There were substantial partisan biases in the responses, but less dramatically so than in the question about the deficit (Achen and Bartels 2006).

¹⁸ Alan Gerber, Gregory Huber, and Ebonya Washington (2010) randomly assigned registered voters with no party affiliation to receive a mailing noting that only voters registered with a party would be eligible to participate in an upcoming primary election. A follow-up survey showed that the mailing stimulated an increase in party identification and corresponding shifts in candidate preferences and evaluations of salient political figures. Auxiliary analysis of potential alternative mechanisms bolstered the authors’ (2010, 742) interpretation “that the change in attitudes we observe was due to a change in partisan identity” rather than vice versa.

causal interpretations of observed change in partisanship and political views (Miller 2000), especially since both partisanship and specific political views are likely to be quite stable over months or even years, aside from measurement error. As our analysis of partisanship and abortion attitudes in chapter 9 showed, studies of the same people over much longer periods of time—decades rather than months or years—can mitigate these limitations, providing clearer understandings of political change; but studies of that sort are time-consuming, expensive, and rare.

An alternative approach is to focus on unusual moments in which dramatic political events change people’s partisanship. In the aftermath of such moments we may be able to observe with unusual clarity whether and how the various aspects of people’s political worldviews reequilibrate. The account of partisan perception offered in this chapter implies that if citizens’ partisan loyalties change due to some dramatic external shock, the reverberations should include changes in a variety of political preferences and beliefs logically unrelated to the shock. That is, if Watergate was bad, then the government should do more to help everyone get a job. Again, this effect need not require citizens to be irrational in the technical sense: peculiar behavior of this kind is a logical implication of the Bayesian model presented by Achen and Bartels (2006). Indeed, it is an implication of the model that the reverberations of changing partisanship may well be most far-reaching among people who are sufficiently engaged and well-informed to recognize a wide variety of specific implications of their altered partisan loyalties.

In this section, we examine one such set of dramatic political shocks—the Watergate scandal of the early 1970s. Fortunately, for our purposes, the Watergate scandal was largely unrelated to substantive political issues of the day. There was no obvious reason, aside from partisanship, for people’s responses to Watergate to alter (or be altered by) their views about school busing or government employment programs. Equally fortunately, a large-scale ANES survey bracketed the major events of the Watergate era, allowing us to observe how people’s perceptions and preferences regarding a variety of specific political issues evolved in response to the escalating scandal, beginning with the run-up to the 1972 presidential election, continuing in the immediate aftermath of President Nixon’s resignation in 1974, and ending with the 1976 election cycle.

The 1974 ANES survey included a variety of questions tapping respondents’ reactions to the Watergate scandal, including whether they were

pleased or displeased by President Nixon's resignation,¹⁹ whether they viewed the House Judiciary Committee's impeachment hearings as fair or unfair,²⁰ whether the media's coverage of Watergate was fair or unfair,²¹ and whether the president's resignation was good or bad for the country.²² We used responses to these four questions to construct a simple additive scale of Watergate attitudes, with scores ranging from -50 (for the most extreme pro-Nixon responses to all four questions) to +50 (for the most extreme anti-Nixon responses to all four questions).²³

Not surprisingly, these reactions to the Watergate scandal were shaped in significant part by preexisting partisan attachments. The average score on the Watergate scale (in 1974) for people who had called themselves strong Republicans in the fall of 1972, when the origins of the break-in were still quite murky and the broader outlines of the scandal were not yet evident, was essentially neutral—0.6. By comparison, people who called themselves strong Democrats in 1972 were strongly critical of Nixon in 1974, with an average score of 29.3. Nevertheless, there was also a good deal of variation in responses within each partisan camp. For example, almost one-third of the people who were strong Republican identifiers in 1972 expressed considerable sympathy for Nixon and antipathy toward his attackers (with Watergate scale scores below -20) in 1974, while another one-third were critical of Nixon and supportive of the media and the impeachment process (with Watergate scale scores above 20). Thus, it should be possible to distinguish the specific effects of reactions to the scandal from the effects of more general partisan predispositions.

We begin by examining the impact of Watergate attitudes on perceptions of relative proximity to the Democratic and Republican parties on a variety of political issues included in the 1972–1976 ANES survey—a summary

19 "Thinking back a few months to when Richard Nixon resigned from office, do you remember if you were *pleased* or *displeased* about his resignation, or didn't you care very much one way or the other?"

20 "As you probably know, before Richard Nixon resigned, the Judiciary Committee was holding hearings to decide whether he should be impeached, that is, brought to trial in the Senate for possible wrongdoings. Would you say that these hearings were very fair, somewhat fair, somewhat unfair, or very unfair, or didn't you pay much attention to this?"

21 "How fair would you say that the television and newspaper coverage of the Nixon administration's involvement in the Watergate affair was? Would you say it was very fair, somewhat fair or not very fair, or didn't you follow this very closely?"

22 "Do you think that President Nixon's resignation was a good thing or a bad thing for the country?"

23 The scale has a mean value of 20.1, a standard deviation of 26.9, and an alpha reliability coefficient of .68.

liberal-conservative scale,²⁴ government jobs and income maintenance,²⁵ school busing,²⁶ rights of accused criminals,²⁷ and government aid to minorities.²⁸ We focus on these issues because self-placements and party placements were included in each wave of the three-wave survey.²⁹ Thus, rather than simply observing the extent to which people's perceptions of relative proximity seem to make sense at any given moment, as in figure 10.1, we can explore how they change when the political environment shifts.

In order to test our assertion that such changes should be concentrated among people sufficiently well-informed to recognize the broad potential ramifications of their partisan predispositions, table 10.2 reports separate

24 "We hear a lot of talk these days about liberals and conservatives. I'm going to show you a 7-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

25 "Some people feel that the government in Washington should see to it that every person has a job and a good standard of living. Others think the government should just let each person get ahead on his own. And, of course, other people have opinions somewhere in between. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

26 "There is much discussion about the best way to deal with racial problems. Some people think achieving racial integration of schools is so important that it justifies busing children to schools out of their own neighborhoods. Others think letting children go to their neighborhood schools is so important that they oppose busing. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

27 "Some people are primarily concerned with doing everything possible to protect the legal rights of those accused of committing crimes. Others feel that it is more important to stop criminal activity even at the risk of reducing the rights of the accused. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about this?"

28 "Some people feel that the government in Washington should make every possible effort to improve the social and economic position of blacks and other minority groups. Others feel that the government should not make any special effort to help minorities because they should help themselves. Where would you place yourself on this scale, or haven't you thought much about it?"

29 Our research design requires that we be able to compare responses before and after the Watergate scandal. In addition, the fact that these items were included in all three waves of the ANES panel survey facilitates estimation of the statistical reliability of the responses. The estimates of the effects of Watergate attitudes in tables 10.2 and 10.3 are derived from errors-in-variables regression models using estimates of the reliability of each explanatory factor within each information group. Our estimates of the reliability of party identification, perceived issue proximity, and respondents' own issue positions are based on the correlations among responses to each item in the three waves of the survey using the measurement error model proposed by Wiley and Wiley (1970). For Watergate attitudes, which were measured only in 1974, our estimates of reliability are the alpha reliability coefficients derived from the correlations among responses to the four distinct survey items making up our Watergate scale.

Table 10.2. The Impact of Watergate Attitudes on Perceptions of Issue Proximity, 1972-1976

	Liberal-conservative	Government jobs	School busing	Rights of accused	Aid to minorities	Weighted average
HIGH INFORMATION						
Watergate attitudes	-0.153 (0.061)	-0.060 (0.079)	-0.174 (0.083)	-0.180 (0.064)	-0.080 (0.073)	-0.134 (0.070)
1972 party identification	0.108 (0.043)	0.059 (0.048)	0.027 (0.044)	0.044 (0.035)	0.049 (0.036)	0.056 (0.040)
1972 issue proximity	0.648 (0.095)	0.829 (0.152)	0.490 (0.096)	0.627 (0.127)	0.855 (0.139)	0.648 (0.113)
Intercept	7.50 (1.57)	5.41 (2.28)	5.04 (2.44)	4.21 (1.61)	2.99 (1.83)	5.13 (1.83)
Standard error of regression	13.02	14.97	16.07	12.38	13.29	—
R ²	.54	.44	.31	.40	.45	—
N	316	309	279	268	313	—
LOW INFORMATION						
Watergate attitudes	-0.032 (0.054)	-0.049 (0.057)	0.131 (0.066)	-0.041 (0.050)	-0.004 (0.051)	-0.008 (0.055)
1972 party identification	0.163 (0.043)	0.091 (0.051)	0.206 (0.045)	0.102 (0.037)	0.129 (0.036)	0.137 (0.041)
1972 issue proximity	0.590 (0.116)	0.491 (0.117)	0.467 (0.096)	0.447 (0.127)	0.397 (0.128)	0.481 (0.114)
Intercept	0.87 (1.47)	1.41 (1.54)	-3.71 (1.79)	0.52 (1.24)	1.33 (1.29)	0.40 (1.42)
Standard error of regression	13.81	16.39	15.54	13.14	13.43	—
R ²	.42	.24	.32	.22	.19	—
N	286	323	268	275	303	—

Errors-in-variables regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses) for survey respondents in the top one-third and bottom two-thirds of the distribution of political information, respectively. Dependent variables are 1976 perceived issue proximities (-50 = closer to Democratic Party; +50 = closer to Republican Party).

analyses of the effects of Watergate attitudes on changing perceptions of issue proximity among respondents in the upper one-third of the overall distribution of political information (in the upper panel) and those in the lower two-thirds of the distribution (in the lower panel).³⁰ To facilitate interpretation of the results, we also present averages of the estimates for all five issues.³¹

The results presented in the first row of table 10.2 represent the estimated impact of Watergate attitudes on perceived issue proximity among high-information respondents. Our measure of perceived proximity ranges from -50 for people who perceived the Democratic Party's position as identical to their own and the Republican Party's position at the opposite end of the seven-point issue scale to +50 for people who perceived the Republican Party's position as identical to their own and the Democratic Party's position at the opposite end of the scale. We relate perceived proximity in 1976 to perceived proximity on the same issue scale in 1972, party identification in 1972, and Watergate attitudes.³²

The negative estimated effects of Watergate attitudes in the top panel of table 10.2 indicate that, as expected, well-informed people who reacted especially strongly to the scandal tended to see themselves as further from the Republican Party (and closer to the Democratic Party) on every issue by 1976, other things being equal. On the other hand, people who were sympathetic to President Nixon and critical of his attackers tended to see themselves closer to the Republican Party (and further from the Democratic Party) as a result.³³ These estimates are fairly consistent across the five issues for which

30 This division of the sample reflects both our sense of the difficulty of the partisan inferences we are attempting to document here and the limitations of the ANES data. Less-informed people were less likely to answer the issue questions we are analyzing here, and they were significantly more likely to drop out of the panel between 1972 and 1976. Thus, a more natural-looking division of the sample into two equal halves would leave too few usable cases in the bottom half to provide any realistic hope of finding Watergate effects among less-informed people.

31 In order to reflect differences in the statistical uncertainty of the separate issue-specific parameter estimates, we report weighted averages in which each parameter estimate and standard error are weighted by the precision (the reciprocal of the squared standard error) of the relevant parameter estimate.

32 We include lagged party identification to allow for the possibility that partisan predispositions in place by the time of the 1972 survey produced partisan rationalization on specific issues between 1972 and 1976. However, since our model does not specify the timing of the inferential processes we posit, we have no strong reason to expect such effects. In contrast, the timing of the Watergate scandal virtually ensures that its effects, if any, will be visible within the compass of the four-year ANES survey.

33 The positive intercepts in these regression models imply that people with scores of zero on the Watergate scale generally saw themselves as increasingly close to the Republican Party

data are available, and in three of the five cases they are too large to be plausibly attributable to sampling error. Moreover, the implied effects are large enough to be politically consequential. For example, a difference of 35 points on the Watergate scale—roughly the difference between respondents at the 25th and 75th percentiles of the distribution—would imply a reduction in perceived distance from the Democratic Party of between two and six points on each of the 100-point issue proximity scales. (By comparison, the average total shifts on these scales from 1972 to 1976, including measurement error, ranged from 11 to 17 points.)

The bottom panel of table 10.2 presents analogous results for respondents in the bottom two-thirds of the distribution of political information. In marked contrast to the top panel, there is very little evidence here of changing perceptions of issue proximity in the wake of the Watergate scandal. Only one of the five separate estimates (for school busing) is comparable in magnitude to the average estimated effect for well-informed respondents, and it has the “wrong” sign (that is, the people who were most critical of Nixon saw themselves as closer to the Republican position on school busing). The average estimated effect for all five issues is almost exactly zero.

The changes in perceived issue proximity documented in table 10.2 could be attributable to either or both of the two distinct processes of rationalization distinguished by Richard Brody and Benjamin Page (1972). On one hand, new (or more committed) Democrats may have *projected* their own preexisting issue preferences onto the party, while viewing Republican positions with a more critical eye. On the other hand, they may have been *persuaded* to change their own issue positions, bringing them into closer alignment with their revised partisan sensibilities. The analyses reported in table 10.3 focus specifically on the latter possibility, estimating the impact of Watergate attitudes on respondents’ own positions on the various issue scales included in the 1972–1976 ANES panel survey. In each case, respondents’ issue positions are coded to range from –50 for the most conservative position on the 7-point ANES issue scale to +50 for the most liberal position. We relate respondents’ positions on each issue in 1976 to their positions on the same issue in 1972, party identification in 1972, and Watergate attitudes.

by 1976. That may seem odd, given that the Democratic presidential nominee in 1972 was widely viewed as being more ideologically extreme than usual. However, it is worth bearing in mind that a score of zero on the Watergate scale actually represents a relatively sympathetic response; only one-fifth of all survey respondents, and only half of strong Republicans, had negative scale values.

Here, too, there is surprisingly strong evidence that Watergate attitudes reverberated in seemingly unrelated corners of the political landscape, at least for well-informed respondents. Those who were most critical of Nixon shifted to the left on government job guarantees, the rights of accused criminals, and school busing, while those who sympathized with him (or were critical of his critics in Congress and the media) became more conservative on those issues. As with the shifts in perceptions of issue proximity, the magnitudes of these shifts are considerable; a typical difference in Watergate attitudes translated into a difference of from two to six points in 1976 issue positions. (By comparison, the average total shifts on these scales from 1972 to 1976, including measurement error, ranged from 12 to 25 points.)³⁴

Parallel analyses for less-informed people (reported in the bottom panel of table 10.3) produce one sizable negative estimate (for aid to minorities), but the average estimated effect across all five issues is only about one-third as large as the corresponding average estimated effect for better-informed people (and even that effect is too imprecisely estimated to be considered reliable). We attribute this difference to the fact that less-informed people lacked the contextual knowledge necessary to translate the partisan shock of Watergate into new positions on the range of logically unrelated issues examined here. Whereas the best-informed people were likely to associate views about the president and the parties with views about government jobs, school busing, and criminal justice procedures, most Americans failed to make those connections, and so their views about specific political issues were largely unaffected by the unmaking of the president.

The most obvious potential objection to the evidence presented in tables 10.2 and 10.3 is that the same people who were most affected by the Watergate scandal might have become more liberal between 1972 and 1976 for entirely different reasons. Reactions to the scandal were correlated with a variety of characteristics beyond partisanship and ideology; for example, better educated people were especially pleased to see President Nixon go, whereas southerners were somewhat more critical than non-southerners

34 As the estimated effects of 1972 issue positions in table 10.3 make clear, well-informed respondents’ views about government jobs were considerably less stable than their views about other issue positions between 1972 and 1976. We interpret this instability as reflecting a shift in the debate about whether the government should try to provide every person with “a job and a good standard of living,” from McGovern’s controversial proposal to give \$1,000 annual grants to every man, woman, and child in 1972 to discussions of more modest public works programs in 1976.

Table 10.3. The Impact of Watergate Attitudes on Issue Preferences, 1972–1976

	Liberal-conservative	Government jobs	School busing	Rights of accused	Aid to minorities	Weighted average
HIGH INFORMATION						
Watergate attitudes	-0.085 (0.063)	-0.228 (0.104)	-0.125 (0.064)	-0.161 (0.110)	-0.077 (0.101)	-0.122 (0.078)
1972 party identification	0.017 (0.038)	0.100 (0.056)	-0.040 (0.036)	-0.165 (0.059)	-0.018 (0.047)	-0.017 (0.044)
1972 issue position	0.850 (0.062)	0.458 (0.070)	0.807 (0.042)	0.897 (0.091)	0.840 (0.074)	0.775 (0.059)
Intercept	7.38 (1.60)	12.13 (2.71)	7.67 (2.21)	9.40 (2.64)	8.00 (2.36)	8.43 (2.13)
Standard error of regression	13.34	23.97	15.63	24.29	20.98	—
R ²	.66	.29	.63	.42	.48	—
N	325	348	356	344	353	—
LOW INFORMATION						
Watergate attitudes	0.085 (0.061)	-0.040 (0.076)	-0.078 (0.055)	-0.076 (0.079)	-0.155 (0.077)	-0.044 (0.067)
1972 party identification	0.079 (0.039)	0.098 (0.054)	-0.021 (0.040)	-0.061 (0.056)	0.006 (0.054)	0.024 (0.046)
1972 issue position	0.832 (0.096)	0.660 (0.074)	0.830 (0.069)	0.881 (0.078)	0.703 (0.068)	0.774 (0.075)
Intercept	-0.47 (1.69)	6.53 (2.06)	4.44 (3.27)	3.98 (2.05)	8.76 (2.02)	4.20 (2.04)
Standard error of regression	16.61	26.79	21.27	27.56	26.36	—
R ²	.38	.28	.36	.39	.33	—
N	343	456	509	451	448	—

Errors-in-variables regression parameter estimates (with standard errors in parentheses) for survey respondents in the top one-third and bottom two-thirds of the distribution of political information, respectively. Dependent variables are 1976 issue positions (-50 = extreme liberal; +50 = extreme conservative).

were of the House Judiciary Committee and the news media. If, for reasons unrelated to Watergate, better educated people were becoming more liberal during this period or southerners were becoming more conservative, those policy shifts may have been only spuriously related to their views about the Watergate scandal.

To assess that possibility, we replicated the analyses presented in tables 10.2 and 10.3 including a variety of demographic characteristics—including age, education, income, race, region, gender, marital status, home ownership, union membership, and church attendance—as additional explanatory factors. The results of those analyses generally confirmed the results presented in tables 10.2 and 10.3. Not surprisingly, the results of the more elaborate statistical analyses were somewhat less precise; nevertheless, both the magnitude and the consistency of our apparent Watergate effects held up quite well, with substantial effects detected among well-informed respondents but rather little evidence of changes in issue positions or perceived issue proximity among those in the bottom two-thirds of the distribution of political expertise.

Our data are not sufficiently powerful to rule out the possibility that even the views of relatively uninformed people were altered to some modest extent by their reactions to the Watergate scandal. For the most part, however, the contextual grasp of politics necessary to make an inferential leap from the scandal to economic and social policy issues seems to have eluded them. On the other hand, there is a good deal of evidence that well-informed people changed both their perceptions of issue proximity and their own views about a diverse assortment of issues in the wake of the Watergate scandal.

In summary, just as our theoretical expectations imply, the shock to established partisan attachments generated by the Watergate scandal altered people's views about a variety of specific political issues logically unrelated to the scandal. Moreover, these effects were concentrated among people who were especially well-informed about politics—in the top one-third of the national distribution of political expertise. Those who responded most negatively to Watergate moved significantly to the left, and saw themselves significantly closer to the Democratic Party, on a variety of issues by 1976.

If anyone had asked these well-informed citizens to explain the changes in their thinking about school busing or government employment programs between 1972 and 1976, we suspect that they would have provided rationalizations of exactly the sort posited by Rahn, Krosnick, and Breuning (1994, 592), "mentioning reasons that sound rational and systematic and that emphasize the object being evaluated, while overlooking more emotional reasons and factors other than the object's qualities." The overlooked factor in

this case, we argue, was the essentially random partisan shock of a Republican president's disgrace and forced resignation. The observable ramifications of that shock among politically attentive people were surprisingly broad and consistent, and thus provide considerable empirical support for the account of partisan perception we have set out here.

CONCLUSION

Most of the time, voting behavior merely reaffirms voters' partisan and group identities. They do not rethink their fundamental political commitments with every election cycle. Insofar as they do consider new issues or circumstances, they often do so not in order to challenge and revise their fundamental commitments, but in order to bolster those commitments by constructing preferences or beliefs consistent with them. They sound like they are thinking, and they feel like they are thinking. We all do. The unwary scholarly devotee of democratic romanticism is thereby easily misled.

When proponents of the folk theory do recognize such pseudo-thinking, they tend to attribute it to political ignorance and inattention—a failure to live up to the high ideals of democratic citizenship. But that view misunderstands the nature of the problem. In fact, political rationalization is often most powerful among people who are well-informed and politically engaged, since their fundamental political commitments tend to be most consistent and strongly held. The result is that the political behavior of well-informed people often displays a sort of stasis grounded in the consistency of their partisan commitments. John Zaller (2004, 166), in a detailed study of voting behavior in U.S. presidential elections, found well-informed voters “resisting short-term forces,” while the less-informed were “typically more responsive to the content of individual elections,” “more apt to reward incumbents who preside over strong national economies and punish those who do not,” “more reactive to changes in the ideological location of the candidates,” and “at least as likely . . . to respond to presidential success or failure in foreign affairs.” In short, political sophistication *dampened* voters’ responsiveness to the very considerations that the folk theory of democracy portrays as the appropriate bases of electoral choice.

Better-informed voters may be logically consistent and even “rational” in the thin technical sense of that term, but the truth of the matter is that they—and all of us, most of the time—exist in what Walter Lippmann (1922, 10) referred to as a “pseudo-environment” only loosely connected to

the real environment where action eventuates. If the behavior is not a practical act, but what we call roughly thought and emotion, it may be a long time before there is any noticeable break in the texture of the fictitious world. But when the stimulus of the pseudo-fact results in action on things or other people, contradiction soon develops. Then comes the sensation of butting one's head against a stone wall, of learning by experience, . . . of the murder of a Beautiful Theory by a Gang of Brutal Facts, the discomfort in short of a maladjustment.

For many people, of course, the discomfort of maladjustment never comes, either because they never emerge from the world of thought and emotion into the world of practical action, or because the concrete consequences of their misperceptions are too indirect for them to apprehend. They exist comfortably in their false but efficient pseudo-environments. Thin rationality of this sort is a far cry from “the notion of a competent citizenry” set out (and criticized) by James Kuklinski and Paul Quirk (2000). Democratic competence requires not only logical consistency and cognitive efficiency, but also some modicum of accuracy in perception and receptiveness to new and, perhaps, disconfirming evidence. In Amartya Sen’s (1977) phrase, it is perfectly possible to be a rational fool.

Consider, once again, the example of the federal budget deficit. John Mark Hansen (1998) provided a detailed analysis of data from a 1995 ANES pilot study in which people were invited to favor or oppose a variety of possible departures from current fiscal policy—raising taxes to reduce the budget deficit, increasing the budget deficit to fund increases in spending on domestic programs, and so forth. The series of questions was carefully designed to allow people to provide logically inconsistent responses—for example, wanting to increase the budget deficit in order to increase domestic spending, but then in a separate question wanting to cut domestic spending in order to reduce the budget deficit. Hansen found very few logical inconsistencies of this sort. On the basis of his analysis, he concluded (1998, 519) that “the public has the ability to make budget policy choices with reasonable discernment. . . . They have well-formed and well-behaved preferences.”

One would hardly guess that these are the same people who, one year later, were largely oblivious to the fact that the federal budget deficit had declined by more than half over the preceding few years. Could people so blatantly unaware of such a salient and politically consequential fact possibly “make budget policy choices with reasonable discernment”? Hansen’s (1998, 526)

assertion that “American democracy does not want for the competence of its citizens” seems hasty, if not wishful.

In sum, we have suggested here that the average citizen’s perception of the federal budget deficit is constructed mostly of folk wisdom and partisan surmise, with a trace element of reality.³⁵ Viewed from the perspective of the folk theory, that is not a promising basis for wise political thinking, nor for sensible voting. Ordinary citizens may indeed do their best to construct consistent, subjectively plausible perceptions of a complex political world. And in practice, they may often succeed in making their beliefs, their policy preferences, and their vote choices fit together coherently. They sound like they’re thinking. But their consistency is often driven by group loyalties and partisan biases, even when it comes to straightforward matters of fact. Thus, while the political psychology depicted in this chapter may be interpreted as remarkably efficient low-information rationality, it is a sort of rationality that should be deeply troubling to enthusiasts of democracy—especially when, as Lippmann (1922, 14) asserted almost a century ago, “these fictions determine a very great part of men’s political behavior.”

The characterization of human thought in politics that we have set out in this chapter may seem shocking, cynical, implausible, or at least exaggerated. But it follows naturally from the power of group loyalties. Of course, politics is no different from other domains of life in this respect. More than a century ago, Lowell (1913, 87) observed that “the influence of membership in an organized body is a force to be reckoned with, and its effect on men’s judgments in all the relations of life is too obvious to require elaboration.” Indeed, isolated or deviant individuals tend to be ignored, shunted aside, and discriminated against in group activities. Thus, most people are powerfully attracted to group membership and to the ideological self-justifications that sustain group life.

In the political sphere, the most salient groups are parties, and the self-justifications that sustain group life are primarily grounded in—and constructed to maintain—partisan loyalties. People tend to adopt beliefs, attitudes, and values that reinforce and rationalize their partisan loyalties. But those loyalties, not beliefs or ideologies or policy commitments, are fundamental to understanding how they think and act.

³⁵ The relative weights of these ingredients are assessed much more exactly by Achen and Bartels (2006).