Is our political system ultimately controlled by politicians or by the public?

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A continuing debate in American political thought from the founding to current political science is over whether politician themselves or the people hold the most power. Is our political system ultimately controlled by politicians or by the public?

When we consider whether politicians or the public rule the American political system, I believe that the public ultimately controls it, even when it is a two-way street relationship, where both groups need each other for the proper government functioning (the public needs politicians who represent their interests, which is why America is a Representative Democracy, politicians need the public to be elected in order to create and implement the policies the public demands). Furthermore, to win elections, candidates require more than gaining the nomination from their political party. They have to persuade the public and be able to mobilize it (Aldrich 1995, 23).

James Madison understood the danger to liberty laid in government officials, who could attempt to deprive citizens of this right. Thus, he believed the solution was elections and limited tenure. The official's replacement would work as a helpful instrument. The general fear was that the government could act against the public to make them support disliked policies considered necessary by politicians. However, politicians might abstain from committing these acts out of fear of failing reelection. Some people might think that the task of the separation of powers is to protect the public from politicians deploying the government against citizens. Yet, for James Madison and other framers of the Constitution, the separation of power represented an auxiliary protection. Instead, the public's primary security lies in the politicians' dependence on the people. In other words, when the electorate is dissatisfied or expects a better performance by politicians, citizens can change elected officials if many consider so. Two examples of such dependence were

the administrations of Johnson and Nixon. The threat of the next elections made Johnson refuse to seek reelection after involving America in the Vietnam War and, at the same time, pressured Nixon to end it. Furthermore, as the African American community faced historical persecution and exclusion from the political system, their emergence as a marginalized bloc between political parties prompted a significant reorientation of the judiciary institution (Riker 1982, 9-11).

The public's influence on politicians is not just limited to the elections. Americans also behave as the thermostat that regulates policymakers by sending signals when policies are not aligned with what the public prefers. These signals exert pressure on politicians to adjust it. Once the policy is revised, the signal stops. Motivated politicians will pay attention to these signals, and those who do not will likely end up being removed from their positions by the electorate (Wlezien 1995, 981-982). In a study conducted by Christopher Wlezien, where he tested a thermostatic model of American public preferences for spending on defense and five social programs using time series regression analysis, he concluded that when government spending increases, the public tends to adjust its preferences downward for more spending. On the contrary, when appropriations decrease, the public's preferences for more spending tend to increase. Yet, for the public to be responsive and act as a thermostat, the media must transmit information about the policies of a particular domain. In the 1970s, the public's preferences for policy moved in a conservative direction, whereas in the 1980s, they changed to the liberal route (Wlezien 1995, 997-999).

James A. Stimson, Michael B. Mackuen, and Robert S. Erikson, in their article *Dynamic Representation* (1995) share Wlezien's perspective about the relationship between public

opinion and policy behavior. They believe that as public opinion moves, politicians sense this movement, making them modify their policy behavior. In addition, they developed a model to examine how the House, Senate, presidency and Supreme Court policies react to changes in public opinion. Their findings revealed that the responsiveness is different for every government institution (Stimson et al. 1995, 543). For instance, since the public elects them, the presidency and House members are more susceptible to a variation in their opinion. Therefore, they are more inclined to alter their policy behavior in order to keep or gain the electorate's support. On the other hand, the Court moves at a different speed (Stimson et al. 1995, 560). This dynamic between the public and politicians suggests, as Wlezien stated above, that the former works as a thermostat and exerts more control over the political system than the latter.

Martin Gilens and Benjamin I. Page offer a different theory that contradicts Wlezien's and Stimson's arguments. The two authors conducted research to predict actors who influence public policy: average citizens, economic elites, and organized interest groups, mass-based or business-oriented (Gilens & Benjamin 2014, 564). Unlike Stimson et al. and Wlezien's findings, Gilens and Page found that regular citizens do not determine policy outcomes in America. When their interests in policies disagree with those of the economic elites or organized interest groups, the public usually loses (Gilens & Benjamin 2014, 576). In the author's words, "ordinary citizens get what they want from government only when they happen to agree with elites or interest groups that are really calling the shots" (Gilens & Benjamin 2014, 573). Even if this theory is correct, the politicians are still not in control of the American political system, whereas the public occasionally is.

As I previously stated, politicians must mobilize the public to get elected. One of the mechanisms they use is campaign events. Some scholars defend the opinion that campaign events have an occasional substantial effect on the voters, some with a more durable effect than others (Shaw 1999, 387). In my opinion, these events might be interpreted as an exercise of influence by politicians over the public by seeking to shape public perceptions and attitudes by leveraging their resources, communication strategies, and platforms to sway public opinion in their favor. Besides, politicians are aware of voters' openness to campaign information and that campaign issues like candidate personality, media coverage and television ads influence them. Former studies have disclosed the enormous impact of presidential debates and national party nominations on voters' assessment of candidates.

Additionally, another research has revealed that scandals and corruption influence voters' candidate preferences since the media increasingly overcovers negative information (Shaw 1999, 389). Yet, even in scenarios where evidence suggests that campaigning is pointless, politicians would still use this mechanism to sway the public, particularly in presidential elections due to the high risks involved (Shaw 1999, 389). On the other hand, the public's ultimate voting decisions indicate that the electorate influences the American political system. While politicians attempt to control the narrative and shape public opinion through campaign events, the definitive say rests with the voters.

Another indication that, in my opinion, might falsely suggest that politicians control the American political system is the theory of the incumbent advantage. For many years, incumbent members of Congress have managed to keep their positions despite occasional low institutional approval or inability to pass meaningful legislation. It is not

unusual for 90% of representatives to get reelected (Carson et al. 2020, 157). There are various reasons why this takes place, which, in the eye of a regular observer, could represent a level of control held by politicians within the system. For instance, the incumbents have access to resources and constituency services. Besides, they can discourage excellent challengers from entering the election (Carson et al. 2020, 159).

According to several scholars, the incumbent advantage has declined since the 1980s. First, the split ticket, due to polarization, has prompted voters to support the same party for Congress and presidential elections. Today, due to polarization, incumbents have found it more challenging to win in a district that favors the opposing party (Carson et al. 2020, 157). Moreover, other electoral reforms, such as implementing the Australian ballot, the demise of patronage, and adopting the primary elections influenced the incumbent advantage's decline (Carson et al 2020, 164). Whatever the reasons for this decay and the advantages of the incumbent that help them win reelection, the public ultimately has the power to reappoint or replace these incumbents. Therefore, the public's voting decisions play a fundamental role in deciding the extent to which incumbents control the political system. The incumbent advantage does offer a certain level of control to politicians. Still, the public's voting choices and political engagement can reinforce or constrain the control held by incumbents. The balance of power between politicians and the public is persistently negotiated through electoral processes.

Understanding why the public chooses a particular candidate over another is crucial in comprehending how a representative democracy works. Both the proximity and the directional theories intend to provide an answer to that question. The proximity theory of voting explains that a citizen would rather vote for a candidate whose political views are

closer to his/hers regardless of whether the candidate stands on the opposite side of the midpoint. A voter leaning towards the left-of-center should decide to vote for a candidate right-of-center rather than a candidate positioned far on the left. Conversely, the directional theory of voting suggests that a citizen should vote for a candidate who stands on their side of the political ideology spectrum rather than a candidate who is situated on the other side, even though the candidate on the other side might be closer to their views. Thus, a left-of-center constituent should pick the far-left candidate over the more immediate right-of-center runner. (Kropko & Banda 2018, 772). But what is the connection between these two theories and our initial question about who runs the American political system?

Both proximity and directional thinking influence how the voters choose a candidate. How candidates communicate their position to the public will determine which thinking they select. For instance, political speeches with a liberal or conservative “binary position” should influence the citizens to use directional thinking. On the other hand, discourses giving emphasis to intermediate position policies should move the public to a more proximity thinking (Kropko & Banda 2018, 773). The public learns about a politician’s position on a policy issue through their discourses communicated through campaigns, the media, and social networks (Kropko & Banda 2018, 783). Thus, because they know the public can be persuaded, politicians and campaign managers will use strategies that will influence voters to think about their choices using the model that will give them their support. For example, candidates who believe they could get the public’s support by swaying them to think in the proximity way might “list bullet points on a mailer with specific policy proposals, while the extreme candidate can use language and images to convey

strong ties with an ideological side." This suggests that politicians have control of the political system by using tactics and media institutions to manipulate the public. However, politicians must respond to public preferences in both the proximity and directional theories. When political polarization is not high, the lines dividing the parties are not visible, and the public is more moderate, the voters will prefer moderate policies. Thus, candidates will have to adjust their campaign strategy communication to get the public's vote, which will likely employ proximity calculations. Finally, if polarization levels have increased in the political parties and the public, the public will probably prefer a candidate who emphasizes ideological directions and intensities (Kropko & Banda 2018, 784).

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