

Stealth Democracy

AMERICANS' BELIEFS ABOUT HOW
GOVERNMENT SHOULD WORK

John R. Hibbing
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Elizabeth Theiss-Morse
University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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PART I

The Benefits of Studying the Processes People Want

THIS OPENING SECTION lays the groundwork for the rest of the book. We take issue with the notion that policy concerns alone drive Americans' political attitudes and behaviors. Instead, we argue that people care at most about one or two issues; they do not care about the vast majority of policies addressed by the government. They want to see certain ends – such as a healthy economy, low crime rates, good schools – but they have little interest in the particular policies that lead to those ends. If this is the case, as we claim, then political scientists should not place policy at the center of the public's political universe.

What do people care about if not policies? We argue that people care deeply about process. Understanding people's process preferences helps solve several mysteries, such as why Americans believe the two major political parties are so similar and the government is so unresponsive to their wishes. People think about process in relatively simple terms: the influence of special interests, the cushy lifestyle of members of Congress, the bickering and selling out on principles. Because they suggest decision makers are taking advantage of the people, these perceived process features make people appear eager to take power away from elected officials.

The centrality of process preferences means they are potentially powerful predictors of people's attitudes toward government. We do not contend that process can explain people's conventional participation in politics or their vote choice between the two major parties. After all, both the Democratic and Republican parties are thought to be part of the same nefarious processes. But process concerns can help us better

understand dissatisfaction with government, support for third-party candidates who focus on process in their campaigns, support for reforms, and compliance with the law. We show that policy matters, but process is often a better predictor of these attitudes and behaviors than policy.

Part I therefore focuses on the distinction between policy and process. In Chapter 1, we discuss the venerated place policy has held in political science research and criticize this view. Policy stands are often unable to explain many political phenomena. Even more important, people do not care much about policies, which means policies cannot adequately explain their political attitudes or behaviors. We offer an alternative explanation in Chapter 2 where we focus on process. Our view of process in this chapter is oversimplified and deals only with people's beliefs about where the locus of decision-making power ought to lie. Should it be with elected officials and institutions or with the people themselves? In Chapter 3 we use this spectrum to explain a variety of attitudes and behaviors: approval of government, support for Ross Perot's third-party candidacy, support for reforms, and willingness to comply with the law.

Policy Space and American Politics

What do people want the government to do? What governmental policies would make the people happy? Questions such as these are apropos in a democracy because public satisfaction, as opposed to the satisfaction of, say, a haughty, distant, and self-serving monarch, is the key goal of democratic governance. The answer to the questions seems obvious, if difficult to achieve – satisfaction increases when governmental policies approximate the policies preferred by the people – and a substantial literature has developed investigating the connection between popular satisfaction with government and the policies government produces. In this chapter, we review much of this literature, but the purpose of this review is to show that, despite the idea's intuitive appeal, people's satisfaction with government is not driven mainly by whether or not they are getting the policies they want – partially yes, but mainly no. Policies and issues are frequently and surprisingly unable to explain variation in people's satisfaction with government. Others have questioned the importance in American politics of the people's issue positions, and we borrow much from them while adding some new evidence of our own.

Theoretically, it is possible to ascertain people's preferences in each and every policy area on the governmental agenda. To measure policy preferences, analysts often present policy options on spectra (rather than as forced-choice dichotomies). For example, a spectrum could run, as it does in the top half of Figure 1.1, from massive cuts in defense spending through a middle ground of no change in current spending levels all the way to massive increases. Such spectra allow individuals to be represented in policy space. Due to logical progressions from, say, more to less spending or fewer to greater

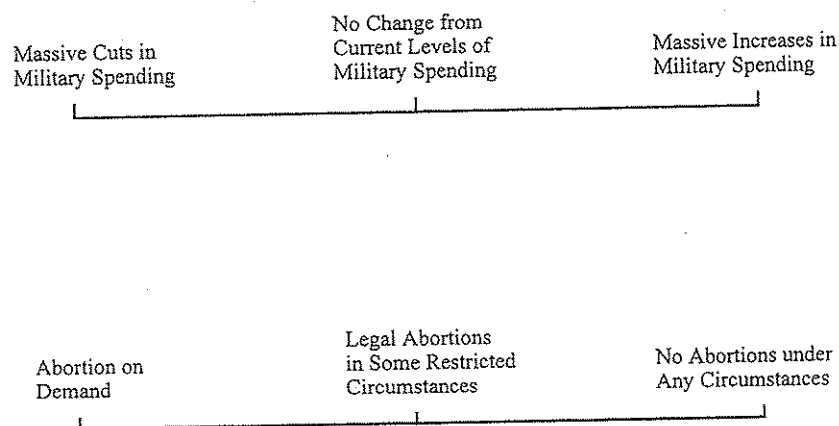


Figure 1.1. Policy space for military spending and for legal abortions.

restrictions on the circumstances in which an abortion can legally take place, analysts can derive meaning and predictions from the relative positions of individuals in this space.

Since there are so many issues being addressed in the political arena, creating a policy space for each of them quickly leads to overload for both the respondents and the analysts. Accordingly, a common practice is to utilize a single, overarching policy space (sometimes called ideological space). Instead of innumerable separate spectra, a composite spectrum running from extremely liberal to moderate to extremely conservative can be used. This practice of treating policy space as unidimensional unavoidably introduces some potentially serious distortions (e.g., liberals on one issue are not necessarily liberals on all issues) and these distortions are discussed in detail below. But the simplification to a single encompassing dimension renders policy space tractable and researchers commonly employ it when studying policy preferences.¹

USING POLICY SPACE TO DERIVE EXPECTATIONS

Whether dealing with an individual issue or the more overarching concept of political ideology, the relevant idea is that people want the distance between their own policy preferences and the policies

¹Hinich and Munger (1994: 160) even argue that employing a single ideological spectrum is not only simpler, it is analytically preferable. For more on the advantages of a single dimension, see Poole and Rosenthal (1997).

passed by government to be small. Perhaps the most obvious application of policy space is the expectation that people will vote for the candidate closest to them on the issues, assuming they deem the issues important. This basic concept of voters attending to the distance between their issue positions and candidates' issue positions was delineated by Hotelling (1929) and elaborated by Downs (1957).² Hotelling's original analogy involved lazy shoppers who were trying to minimize the distance they walked to a store. Just as customers would patronize the nearest store, voters were expected to support the political candidate whose policy position was closest to their own. To stick with one of the examples from Figure 1.1, an ardent "abortion on demand" voter would be expected to vote for whichever candidate favored the fewest restrictions on a woman's right to an abortion. Candidates and parties, being Machiavellian vote maximizers in the spatial world, would adopt the policy position that would attract the most votes just as stores would locate wherever they would attract the most customers.

Just what is the optimal position or location for a party or a candidate? In the United States, it is in the middle, since Americans tend to adopt centrist positions on most policy issues. Usually, a relatively small number of people prefer massive increases or massive decreases in military spending, with most favoring either no or minor alterations in current spending levels. Even on abortion, which many take to be the quintessential divisive issue, most Americans actually support the middling position of permitting abortions but under a number of restrictive conditions. Fiorina (1996) believes this is why divided government is so common. Most American voters view themselves as residing in the middle of policy space and see the parties as being on each side of the middle, Republicans to the right and Democrats to the left. Fiorina claims that the separation of powers system we have in the United States allows people to obtain the centrist policies that neither party would provide if left entirely to its own devices. People do so, of course, by electing one party to one institution (the Congress) and the other party to the other major elective institution (the presidency), thereby ingeniously minimizing the distance between their policy preferences and actual policies.

A widely invoked corollary of the notion that voters select candidates whose policy stands are most consistent with their own

²For good summaries, see Enelow and Hinich (1984); Merrill and Grofman (1999).

preferences is that people will vote for incumbents when the government is producing the "right" kind of policies. Often, analysts test this expectation not by determining the precise policy-space location of an incumbent politician relative to voters but by assuming voters desire peace, a prosperous economy, low crime rates, and so on, and then determining whether incumbents are more likely to win votes when these favorable conditions apply (see, esp., Tufte 1975; Fiorina 1981). This shift from policy positions to policy outcomes is an important one, although analysts are still assuming policy-goal-directed behavior on the part of voters.

However policy satisfaction is measured, analysts believe it influences far more than whether they vote for candidate A or candidate B, the incumbent or the challenger. Barely half of those eligible take the opportunity to vote in even the most publicized and salient of American elections, and many more people are not eligible, so a focus on voting behavior ignores the sentiments of half of the adult population. All people, on the other hand, make decisions about whether or not to support the government and its various parts, whether or not to participate in politics (conventionally or otherwise), and whether or not to comply with governmental edicts, and these are the topics that are of most concern to us.

In many respects, we should expect policy space to be strongly related to public attitudes toward government. After all, it makes sense that those dissatisfied with the outputs of government would also be dissatisfied with the government itself. This was certainly the thinking of Gamson (1968: 178), who contended that political distrust could be traced to undesirable policy decisions and outcomes. As Alesina and Wacziarg (2000: 166) put it, "greater voter dissatisfaction could also originate from increased discrepancies between the preferences of the median voter and the policies actually implemented." Citrin (1974), Miller (1974), and virtually all others who have written on the topic have assumed the same. Citrin (1974: 973) summarizes the core hypothesis nicely: "Political elites 'produce' policies; in exchange, they receive trust from citizens satisfied with these policies and cynicism from those who are disappointed." Citrin even refers to the notion that "we tend to trust and like those who agree with us" as "one of social science's most familiar generalizations" (973).

So the expectation is that disliked policies and conditions will lead to negative attitudes toward government: a lack of confidence, an absence of trust, a dearth of support. Similar logic leads to expecta-

tions that when government produces policies the people dislike or that lead to unfavorable societal conditions, the nature and level of people's political participation (including their tendency to engage in violent political behavior) and perhaps even their willingness to obey the government's laws and rules will be affected (see Tyler 1990). When people are displeased with current policies, the argument goes, they are more likely to grumble about the government, to take steps to signal their displeasure to the powers that be, and to view the actions of such a flawed government as something less than fully legitimate.

THE LIMITATIONS OF POLICY EXPLANATIONS

It certainly makes sense to expect disfavored policies to lead to a disfavored government, and empirical analyses have often revealed support for these expectations. But a fair reading of the research in this area leads to the clear conclusion that policies – substantive issues, if you prefer – are far less consequential to most Americans than scholars typically expect. In this section we detail the limited explanatory powers of policy when it comes to many of the dependent variables mentioned above.

The concept of policy space has been tremendously influential. Citations in the political science literature to the policy-space concepts of Downs now easily outstrip citations to the psychological concepts found in Campbell et al. and Downs is assigned in more American Politics graduate seminars than Campbell et al. (see Dow and Munger 1990). But the widespread usage of policy-space concepts should not be taken to imply universal acceptance. Serious reservations abound regarding both the theory behind policy space and the evidence of its influence. Some skeptics have difficulty visualizing voters as possessing the requisite ability and inclination to estimate the relative distance in policy space between their own positions and those of the candidates seeking various offices. Instead, vote choice may be the result of psychological attachments to groups and parties. These attachments may exist for less-than-rational reasons and may even predate the ability of most voters to think rationally about complex issues. As is well known, children adopt a party identification long before they understand the policy implications of that identification. People later adopt policies to fit into their existing party identification (see Campbell et al. 1960: ch. 7). And even when these psychological attachments are not determinative, it may be that

candidate image, style, slogans, and presentation are more important than issue positions. As Popkin (1991: 78–9) points out repeatedly, personal information drives out policy information. People are enamored with the candidates' personalities far more than with their policies. Thus, while people can turn against their long-term attachments, their reasons for doing so are often not based on policy concerns (see Campbell et al. 1960: ch. 19).

Stokes (1963) has taken these arguments even further and stresses the importance of "valence issues," those that do not distinguish the parties all that much. Both parties, presumably, want lower crime rates, improved economic conditions, and fewer births to teenage mothers. According to Stokes, voters are left to make their best guesses about which candidates are most likely to accomplish these goals. The issue, therefore, is not so much which party is closer to a voter's ideal position on policy space but, rather, which candidate inspires confidence. Stokes believes that Downs has pointed analysts in a particularly unpromising direction and that the explanation for vote choice is generally not the voter's policy utility and (often inaccurate) perceptions of the candidates' policy locations.

Whether the alleged deciding factor is party identification, candidate image, or a valence issue, the basic notion uniting most of the critiques of policy spatial theory is simply that voters tend to decide on the basis of things other than the perceived location of candidates on policy space. The underlying conceit is that issue voting demands too much of voters by requiring that they have issue positions of their own *and* an understanding of the issue positions of the competing candidates. This last point is particularly difficult. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996: 76) playfully note after examining fifty years of survey items, only two issue stands of public officials have ever been correctly identified by at least three out of four respondents: Clinton's "don't ask, don't tell" approach to gays in the military and George H. W. Bush's 1989 revelation that he hates broccoli. As a result of their policy uncertainties, voters are more likely to fall back on the shortcuts provided by party identification or countless other heuristic devices (see Popkin 1991).

Perhaps for these reasons, empirical tests of the hypothesis that voters are attracted to candidates with whom they share policy predilections have been disappointing. Scholars have been hard pressed to demonstrate empirically that the perceived distance in policy space between a voter and competing candidates is a key predictor of which candidate the voter will support. The demands of

policy voting are great. Voters must feel strongly about an issue, know their own established position on the issue, and know the respective candidates' positions on the issue. Often the candidates go out of their way to obfuscate their positions,³ thereby making it difficult for even well-meaning voters. Faced with these challenges, voters may simply project their own policy preferences onto their preferred candidate, thus reversing the expected causal sequence (see Niemi and Weisberg 1976: 161–75; Page and Jones 1979). This tendency of voters to attribute desired policy positions to candidates they like rather than to like candidates who have desirable policy positions is incredibly damning to those who stress the causal importance of policies. It suggests that voters merely make up policy positions for candidates, and often the attributed policy positions bear little resemblance to candidates' actual positions.

Are policy positions merely created out of thin air in an effort by voters to justify choices they made on the basis of nonpolicy reasons? No. While sorting out the direction of the causal arrow is methodologically challenging, Page and Jones (1979) engaged in a careful effort to do so. In the two presidential elections they studied (1972 and 1976), they found that policy positions did influence candidate preference. Policy matters. But in both elections they found that the link from candidate preference to policy positions was stronger than the link from policy positions to candidate preference. In these two elections, at least, projection was more prevalent than issue voting. And if this is the case in presidential elections, imagine the amount of projection in lower-level races where candidates' policy positions are harder to determine. Defenders of the importance of policy are fond of noting that voters generally share more policy preferences with the candidates for whom they voted than with those for whom they did not. But work like that of Page and Jones shows that such protestations badly miss the mark. Just as is the case with children and party identification, policy substance often comes well after a vote choice has been made and is less substance than rationalization.

If people *are* issue-involved, chances are their concerns are limited to a very small number of issues. Evidence for this conclusion is found in the scholarly work on issue publics. First articulated by Converse (1964) and elaborated perhaps most successfully by Krosnick (1990; see also Key 1966; RePass 1971), the idea is attractive – so

³See Page and Brody (1972); Alvarez and Franklin (1994); Hinich and Munger (1994: 235).

attractive that we draw heavily on it later in the book. Voters are not interested in most policies addressed by the government, but some voters are interested in one, perhaps two, policy areas. Though they do not care about much, they may care about government actions in a particular area and they may even be willing to vote on the basis of the candidates' policy stances concerning this issue area. Farmers may follow farm policies, Jews may be particularly interested in U.S. policy toward Israel, and the economically downtrodden may be attuned to welfare and related policies. In this fashion, if policy positions play a role at all, the relevant issue varies from person to person, and most issues are irrelevant to these issue specialists.⁴

In light of the extremely limited concern most people have for most policies, it is not surprising that even those who are the most eager for policy space to predict voting behavior do not often try to test the relationship. Enelow and Hinich (1984), for example, use feeling thermometers for various political figures to predict voting behavior. The idea is that the more warmly a respondent feels toward a political figure, the more likely that respondent is to vote for the political figure. The problem with this procedure, of course, is that there is absolutely no reason to assume the thermometer ratings have anything to do with policy positions. Instead, voters may like certain political figures because of where they were born, what foods they like, or how they part their hair.⁵ Concerning the task of predicting vote choice, the verdict must be that policy space is something less than successful. Perceived policy distance may influence vote choice under certain highly restrictive conditions but it is not usually the central concern for most voters.⁶

⁴Of course, a slice of the population is deeply involved in policies of all kinds, but this slice is surprisingly small. As far as political information is concerned, people tend not to be information specialists. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) found that knowledge in one issue area correlates strongly and positively with knowledge in other areas (see also Zaller 1986; Bennett 1990). People either know a lot about a variety of policies or they know little.

⁵Fiorina (1996) does provide some tests of his institution-balancing model, but his results have been subjected to vigorous challenge (see Alvarez and Schousen 1993; Born 1994; Frymer 1994).

⁶Even those who see policy space as a key element of vote choice do not agree on exactly how it works. Reacting to the occasionally inaccurate predictions yielded by Downsian notions, Rabinowitz and Macdonald (1989) suggest that the absolute distance from voter to target is not as important as being on the same side of the political debate. They refer to this as the directional theory: Voters will vote for a candidate more distant from their own preferences if that is the only way they can vote for a

A similar, fairly dismal assessment can be rendered concerning the ability of policy space to predict whether and how people participate in politics. To be fair, the theoretical basis for hypotheses concerning participation is less clear. What, exactly, is the expected result of a person believing the government's policies depart from his or her own policy preferences? Would such a belief inspire involvement in an effort to change the situation or would it encourage despair and alienation from the system?⁷ The absence of a clear answer to these questions is no doubt part of the reason standard investigations of political participation pay virtually no attention to the possibility that the divergence between a person's own policy positions and current perceived governmental policy will be a key determinant of who participates and who does not.⁸

Downs is in a similar boat. His famous treatment of voting abstention (1957: ch. 14) is almost entirely devoted to the costs of voting. He *does* raise the possibility that abstention could be caused not by the perceived location of governmental policies but by the perceived differences between the options being presented by the parties. Specifically, he hypothesizes that the benefits of voting will increase if voters perceive substantial policy differences between the two parties, but he provides no empirical tests. Other than this, even most proponents of policy space as an important independent variable do not claim it has much clout when it comes to standard political participation such as voting, working for campaigns, or contributing money to political movements.⁹

It may be, however, that policy factors are more useful when it comes to less traditional modes of participation. A distaste for current governmental policies (and for the policies being promoted by the two established parties making up the government) could lead not so much to alterations in the tendency to be involved in voting or campaigning for the established parties and their candidates but, rather, to an embrace of less traditional, even illegal, political

candidate who shares their view of the direction needed to move on that issue (see Merrill and Grofman 1999 for an attempt to synthesize the directional and proximity views).

⁷Perhaps this relationship is curvilinear with modest policy discrepancies encouraging participation but gigantic discrepancies resulting in an abandonment of hope.

⁸Rosenstone and Hansen (1993); Verba, Scholzman, and Brady (1995).

⁹For treatments of the relevance of policy spatial theory for political participation, see Hinich and Ordeshook (1970); Ordeshook (1970); McKelvey (1975); Aldrich (1995: 178-80).

participation – or at least of an alternative party. Was support for H. Ross Perot in the presidential races of 1992 and 1996 driven by the fact that his policy positions were more attractive to voters? Do people who are grossly displeased with current government policies protest with greater frequency than their less displeased colleagues? It seems possible that those willing to take to the streets or to turn their backs on the traditional parties would be those most discontented with current policies. However, tests of these ideas have been neither plentiful nor conclusive.¹⁰ Though such hypotheses may eventually prove true (it would seem supporters of Ralph Nader in 2000 were probably more displeased with governmental policies than supporters of Al Gore and George W. Bush), empirical evidence connecting policy space to participation of any kind is mostly lacking.

Our primary interest in this book, however, is to find out what people want out of government. As we have just seen, a widespread expectation is that people are primarily concerned with obtaining their preferred policies and pleasant societal conditions. Popkin (1991: 99) is up-front about this, saying that people “generally care about ends not means; they judge government by results and are . . . indifferent about the methods by which the results were obtained.” As has been the case with the other policy-based hypotheses, though, the notion that policy perceptions or outcomes explain attitudes toward government has not fared well on those few occasions when it has been empirically tested. Miller (1974: 952), for example, investigated “the impact that reactions to political issues and public policy have on the formation of political cynicism.” His empirical work (done with survey data from the 1960s) produced a string of disappointments. On Vietnam, the most salient issue of the day, “the most immediate observation . . . is that the original prediction that the most cynical would be those favoring withdrawal is partly false” (953). On race, over the very years that governmental policy began actively promoting integration, “individuals in favor of forced integration [became discontented] at a faster rate” (957). Admittedly, Miller is unable to test the hypothesis properly since he does not employ measures of what people perceive government policies to be and only makes assumptions about those perceptions. But the point remains that there is little evidence for the commonsensical notion that citizens who agree with governmental policies will trust

¹⁰But see Muller (1972) and Sears and Maconahay (1973) for some interesting speculation concerning the related concept of violent political behavior.

government and citizens who are “disappointed” with these policies will be cynical toward government.

More typically, scholars have tested whether favorable societal conditions, such as a booming economy, cause people to be satisfied with government. Though surges in support for government sometimes seem to occur during strong economic times, systematic analyses invariably question the role of economic conditions. Lawrence (1997) finds no consistent effect. Putnam, Pharr, and Dalton (2000: 24) conclude that “a growing body of work generally discounts [macro-economic conditions] as the primary explanation for the decline in public confidence in political institutions.” Overall, evidence for a connection between satisfaction with outcomes or conditions and satisfaction with government can be classified as only weak. Like so many others, Pharr (2000: 199) is forced to conclude that “policy performance . . . explains little when it comes to public trust.” It is easy to understand why della Porta (2000: 202) asked, “[W]hy do policy outputs in general, and economic performance and expectations in particular, play such a minor role in shaping confidence in democratic institutions?”

MORE LIMITATIONS OF POLICY EXPLANATIONS

To this point, we have demonstrated the limitations of policy explanations by relying upon previous research, but the same message is also apparent in data originally collected for this project. To illustrate, we draw readers’ attention to two assertions frequently made by ordinary Americans. The first is that the two major political parties are virtual carbon copies of each other, and the second is that the government is out of touch with the people. If people are concerned only with policy ends, neither of these assertions makes any sense.

Americans frequently complain that the two political parties are identical.¹¹ Interestingly, when people are asked to place the parties on policy space they actually see the parties as being quite distinct.

¹¹See Pomper (1972: 419); Margolis (1977); and Wattenberg (1981: 943-4). While the percentage of people who claim there is no difference between the two major parties has diminished since the 1970s, the extent of the decline is not large. The American National Election Study (NES) survey has periodically asked respondents whether they “think there are any important differences in what the Republicans and Democrats stand for.” In the 1970s, an average of 48 percent responded that there was no difference, compared with an average of 38 percent in the 1980s and 41 percent in the 1990s.

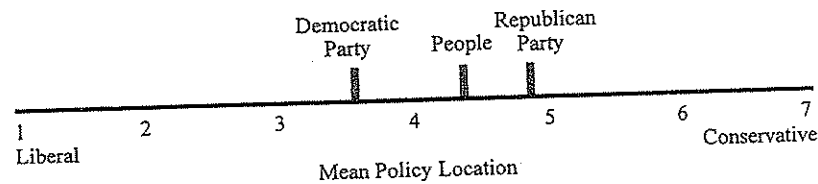


Figure 1.2. Policy space location of the people and their perceptions of the two major parties.

We administered a lengthy survey on policy and process attitudes to a national sample of 1,266 voting-age Americans in the late spring of 1998.¹² In that survey we asked people to locate themselves and the two parties on the ideological (or policy) spectrum. The mean placement provided by respondents is depicted in Figure 1.2. In spite of the prevalence of the belief that “there is not a dime’s worth of difference between the parties” or that “they are no more different than Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum,” people typically attribute much more than a dime’s worth of difference to the policy positions of the two parties. While the mean self-placement of respondents was just a little to the conservative side of the center (4.4 on a scale running from 1 to 7, with higher numbers indicating more conservative policy positions, lower numbers indicating more liberal positions, and 4.0 representing the midpoint), the common perception of the policies advocated by the Democratic party is that they are to the left of the people (3.6), while Republican policy positions are located to the right of the people (4.9).¹³ The obvious question becomes, how can people see one party as being to their left on policy space and the other party as being to their right and still insist that there is no appreciable difference between the two parties? A total reliance on policy space renders it difficult to understand the situation.

Similar to the claim that the parties are identical, the notion that the government is out of touch has become a touchstone phrase for many Americans. Just a few months before conducting the national

¹² See Appendix A for information on the national survey.

¹³ For a report of similar results produced by another survey, see Carman and Wlezien (1999). We found, using NES data, that the average placement of the two major parties on a seven-point ideology scale was 3.10 for the Democrats and 4.84 for the Republicans in the 1970s, 3.33 for the Democrats and 4.99 for the Republicans in the 1980s, and 3.28 for the Democrats and 5.02 for the Republicans in the 1990s.

survey, we convened eight focus group sessions at locations across the United States.¹⁴ Several participants in these groups complained about an out-of-touch government. Consider the following comments from two different focus group participants: “[T]he vast majority of Congress’s members have no idea really what the people’s wishes are” and “I don’t think [elected officials] have any idea about what anyone wants.” Virtually identical sentiments were recorded in the focus groups done by the Kettering Foundation (see Mathews 1994: 11–48) and can also be heard frequently on most street corners and in most bars. If more systematic evidence is desired, nearly 70 percent of the respondents in our survey disagreed (some strongly) with the statement that the current political system does “a good job of representing the interests of all Americans.” The feeling that the political system is unresponsive to the desires of the people is rampant.¹⁵

The curious thing is that people claim to be moderate in their policy affinities *and* they perceive governmental policies as being essentially moderate, too. To provide the complete picture, in Figure 1.3 we present not just the mean location (as was done in Fig. 1.2) but the entire distribution of people’s policy self-placement (the solid line) and their perceived placement of federal government policies (the dotted line). The similarity of the two distributions is striking. Americans are clearly moderates, with 71 percent preferring policies of the middle (e.g., 3, 4, or 5). This is no surprise. More noteworthy is the fact that Americans are almost as likely to see governmental policies as centrist, with 70 percent placing government policies at 3, 4, or 5. The people’s desired policies are only slightly more conservative (a mean of 4.4) than the policies they believe they are getting from the federal government (a mean of 4.0). A difference of only 0.4 on a seven-point scale separates preferences from perceived realities (for more on this point, see Monroe 1979).

Of course, these aggregate data may well mask important individual-level differences. As we argued earlier, some people care deeply about policies and pay attention to what the government does in a variety of policy areas. Similarly, some people are not policy moderates, and these ideologues may be inclined to view government policies as far removed from their own policy preferences. Liberals could

¹⁴ See Appendix A for information on the focus groups.

¹⁵ See also Wright (1976); Kettering Foundation (1991); Craig (1993); and Phillips (1995).

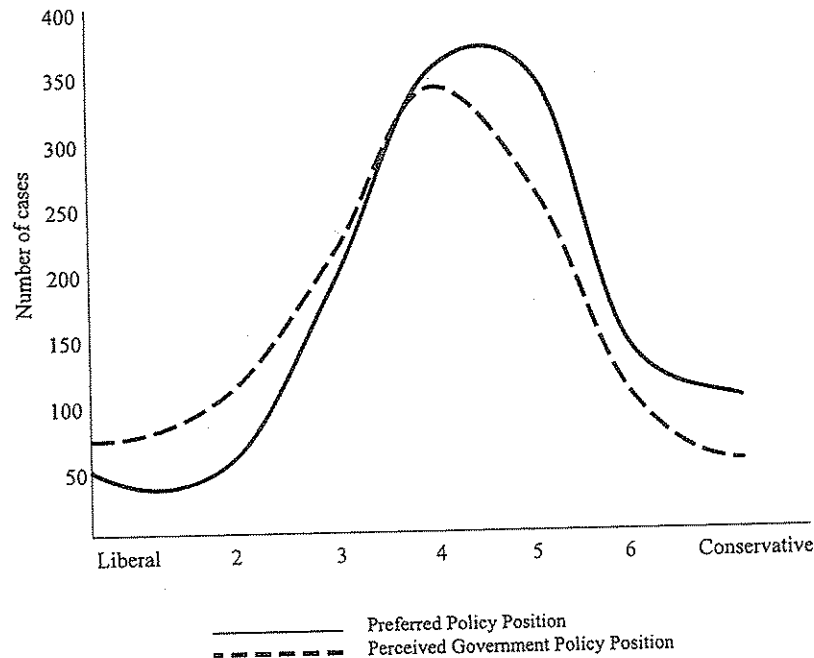


Figure 1.3. Policy space distribution of the people and their perception of actual governmental policies.

think government policies much too conservative, whereas conservatives could think government policies much too liberal. Moderates might also exhibit individual-level differences that are lost in our aggregate analysis. To test whether we have missed something, we divided people into three groups according to their self-placement on policy space: liberals (who placed themselves at 1 or 2), moderates (3, 4, or 5), and conservatives (6 or 7).

Table 1.1 shows the mean self-placement of liberals, moderates, and conservatives as well as their perceptions of government policies. Ideologues clearly see a much larger gap between their own preferred policies and the policies government produces (a gap of 2.75 for liberals and 2.97 for conservatives) than do moderates (a gap of only 0.01). While these results demonstrate that there are individual-level differences between some people's own self-placement and perceived government policy positions, there are two aspects of these results that deserve mention. First, and somewhat surprisingly, liberals, moderates, and conservatives alike perceive

Table 1.1. Policy preferences and perceived government policies among liberals, moderates, and conservatives

	Preferred policy position	Perceived government policy position	Difference	N
Liberals	1.46	4.21	2.75	98
Moderates	4.18	4.17	0.01	797
Conservatives	6.49	3.52	2.97	237

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

government policies as moderate. Liberals and conservatives, who perceive a fairly large differences between their own policy positions and the government's, still place government policy positions well within the moderate range (4.21 for liberals and 3.52 for conservatives). Second, as mentioned above, the vast majority of Americans (over 70 percent) consider themselves moderate, and these moderates view government policies as right in sync with their own preferences (a minuscule difference of only 0.01). So, while liberals and conservatives believe government policies are too moderate given their own proclivities, they make up less than 30 percent of the population.¹⁶ For the vast majority of Americans, government policies match their own preferences.

How, then, can the people be so convinced that the government is wildly out of touch with their interests, desires, and concerns? If the public's perception is that federal policies do not diverge much from the policies they desire, what are people thinking when they insist that the government is "out of touch"? Once again, policy positions on their own are unable satisfactorily to account for an important feature of the American political scene.

¹⁶Liberals and conservatives are not more likely, even given their perception that government policies are far removed from their own preferences, to believe government does not represent all Americans or to feel dissatisfied with government policies. Survey respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed (on a four-point scale) with the following statements: "The current political system does a good job of representing the interests of all Americans, rich or poor, white or black, male or female" and "You are generally satisfied with the public policies the government has produced lately." Liberals, moderates, and conservatives gave similar responses to these two questions: means of 2.1, 2.2, and 2.2, respectively, for the representation question, and means of 2.6, 2.6, and 2.3, respectively, for the policy satisfaction question.

WHY IS POLICY SPACE ALONE INADEQUATE?

Perhaps those familiar with American politics will not be too surprised by the inadequacies of policy positions in explaining various political phenomena. After all, using policies to make judgments takes a substantial amount of work, and an impressive and growing corpus of literature points to the conclusion that individual Americans may not be up to the demands of the classical policy-driven democratic citizen. Delli Carpini and Keeter's (1996) investigation into what Americans know about politics concludes that "political knowledge levels are, in many instances, depressingly low" (269). These poorly informed citizens, in turn, "hold fewer, less stable, and less consistent opinions. They are more susceptible to political propaganda and less receptive to relevant new information" (265). Most pertinent to the current discussion, "they are less likely to connect . . . their policy views to evaluations of public officials and political parties in instrumentally rational ways . . . and . . . they are less likely to tie their actions effectively to the issue stands and political orientations they profess to hold" (265). Consequently, Delli Carpini and Keeter found that "for the substantial portion of citizens who are poorly informed . . . voting was poorly connected to their views on issues" (258).

The inability of people's issue stances to explain more of their attitudes and behavior is probably due to the fact that people's issue stances are often not so much stances as dances. Converse (1964) demonstrated long ago that issue positions change alarmingly over time. Zaller (1992) has elaborated on this theme more recently, presenting evidence that, rather than holding preformed attitudes on issues, people construct "opinion statements" on the fly as they confront each new issue, making use of whatever idea is at the top of their heads.

And, of course, there is always the danger that standard research techniques overstate the role of issues. Most of what we know about how issues affect people's political attitudes and behaviors comes from survey research. As John Brehm (1993) has carefully pointed out, survey nonresponse rates have been growing rapidly and are approaching 50 percent. Not surprisingly, those who answer political surveys are not identical to the 50 percent who do not. One major difference is that "refusals are less informed about politics than respondents" (62). Brehm also shows that nonrespondents are less interested in politics, so it does not take a particularly large inferen-

tial leap to conclude that survey respondents are probably more likely than typical Americans to care about policies. Brehm additionally recognizes that even his estimates of the discrepancies caused by nonresponse are probably conservative because his baseline (Current Population Studies) has some survey characteristics and therefore some nonresponse problems of its own. In short, traditional survey methodology overrepresents issue concern and still concludes that concern is anemic.

Further support for the malleability of people's policy positions comes from Sniderman, Hagendoorn, and Prior (2000). Continuing an interesting line of work that attempts to determine how easy it is to talk respondents out of their original answers, they conclude that "the portion of the public that can be induced to change their mind on major issues remains impressive" (6; see also Sniderman and Piazza 1993 and Gibson 1998). Even more disconcerting are their findings that "content free" counterarguments (such as "Considering the complications that can develop, do you want to change your mind?") are just as effective at inducing changes as real arguments and that opinion switching is more common if the interviewer paid the respondent an empty compliment before asking the respondent if he or she wanted to change answers. Sniderman et al. conclude quite sensibly that "a substantial fraction of the public is only weakly attached to the positions they take, or possibly not attached at all" (33).

More evidence of the sensitivity of stated opinions to contextual factors is found in a fascinating experiment conducted by Amy Gangl (2000). Details are provided below, but for now the relevant point is that her experimental subjects read about a policy dispute in Congress. Some subjects read an account that stressed divisiveness, while other subjects read an account of a more agreeable congressional exchange. In their posttest evaluations of Congress, the initial policy positions of the subjects were irrelevant to the reactions of those reading the agreeable account, but for those who read about a serious congressional fight, their initial policy preferences had a significant effect on how they evaluated Congress. Pointed conflict, in other words, made it more likely that people cared about the outcome. Gangl's research demonstrates the remarkable degree to which people's policy preferences can be ignited or doused merely by the manner in which issues are handled. If no conflict is present, people's initial policy preferences will lie dormant and may even atrophy. The presence of conflict, however, can heighten the role of

initial policy preferences – if the issue is one for which people care enough to have a preference in the first place.

Though open to question, one interpretation of the modern American polity is that, compared with times past, there are now fewer issue disputes on matters about which the people really care. Remember, it is necessary only to go back to the 1950s to find a time in which the stated policy of one of the major parties (the Republicans) was to abolish the Social Security program. Today, neither party makes serious proposals to abolish Social Security, and the only arguments offered concern how the cost of living adjustment (COLA) should be calculated and whether participants should have the option of investing a small portion of their individual holdings in the stock market. These are not unimportant matters and some people have become exercised, at least about the latter, but in the larger scheme of things these disputes pale in comparison to whether or not a mandatory pension plan for the elderly should exist. When the political debate is reduced to the mechanics of COLA calculation, we should not be surprised that many citizens do not have an initial policy preference on many issues addressed in the halls of power.

This narrowing of debate and differences is found in many other issue areas and may, perversely, encourage politicians to be inappropriately strident and petty. Ex-Representative Fred Grandy, reflecting on the political implications of the 1997 bipartisan balanced budget agreement, stated that “coupled with the end of the Cold War . . . party defining issues are getting harder to find . . . it means going into local and personal issues” (quoted in “A Balanced-Budget Deal Won . . .” 1997: 1831). Russell Hardin (2000: 43–44) contends:

The former left-right antagonism has been reduced to a very short spread from those who prefer more generous welfare programs to those who prefer somewhat less generous programs, and the difference between the two positions represents a very small fraction of national income. Radical reorganization of the economy to achieve some degree of equality or fairness is now virtually off the agenda. . . . The odd result is that politics may be noisier and seemingly more intense and even bitter, but it is less important.

Of course, policy differences still exist. But the point is that many of these differences are sufficiently nuanced that a large share of the American public does not regard them as important. Maybe they should, but they do not. The constituency for major policy changes in the United States does not exist. Ask Ralph Nader and Patrick

Buchanan. When people claim to want political change, they are not typically speaking of policy change (as we demonstrate in Chapter 2). The result is that the policy positions of the two major parties frequently seem quite similar. Democratic President Bill Clinton passed a largely Republican version of welfare reform and Republican President George W. Bush’s first policy package was a largely Democratic education plan (with a tepid and half-heartedly supported voucher component added for cover). Policy differences obviously remain on the scene, but our point is that the people believe that most of them concern only details and that, therefore, much political conflict is actually contrived.¹⁷ As a result, they have difficulty seeing the point, let alone care about the outcome. People despise pointless political conflict and they believe pointless political conflict is rampant in American politics today.

But perhaps even as people dismiss the relevance, importance, and meaning of most governmental policies, they retain a general predisposition toward the liberal or the conservative side of the political spectrum. After all, such an inclination does not demand an awareness of details. Maybe so, but, attributing great meaning to overarching ideological positions is not without danger. People are not particularly comfortable with an ideological spectrum even though it tends to fascinate elite observers. The terms liberal and conservative, or even the terms left and right, are not deeply understood by most people.¹⁸ These are phrases the public uses only with great prodding, and most do not understand them well even after prodding. Further, people are not good at placing politicians on a liberal-conservative scale and frequently do not tie together issue positions that elites expect to be tied together under the rubric of liberal or of conservative. People do not like to be labeled, and their lack of constraint across issues suggests their dislike is understandable and even well founded. People often think in neither policy nor ideological terms.

So, attempts to salvage issue voting (or even issue thinking) by moving from stances on individual issues to stances on collections of issue positions generally come to naught. Rather than wrestle with the intricacies of individual issues in a technologically complex society or rely on incomplete and inaccurate labels developed long

¹⁷For a critique of the view that the parties are becoming more similar in policy positions, see Gerring (1998).

¹⁸See Converse (1964); Levitin and Miller (1979); Conover and Feldman (1981).

ago to encapsulate collections of particular policy positions, most people look to something other than the issues in their effort to get a grip on the political scene. And it is nearly time for us to describe what that "something other" is.

CONCLUSION

Most Americans are not political elites, and, thus, policies and policy positions are not politically determinative. This can be seen in their voting behavior, as E. J. Dionne, Jr. (2000: 27), notes in his summation of the presidential elections of 2000: "The exit polls made abundantly clear that a large and critical portion of Bush's support came from voters who are closer to Gore on the issues." A startling number of Bush voters also viewed Gore as more competent to deal with the issues. And the lack of influence of policy matters certainly applies to approval of government itself. Many people who have no particular problem with the policies produced by the government are tremendously dissatisfied with that government.

Interpretations of American politics that rely exclusively on policy space are doomed to failure. A focus group participant named Linda complained that people who run for office "have to believe so strongly in one thing . . . they have to have something that drives them to run for office . . . so sometimes you get the wrong kind of people in government." This sentiment nicely illustrates the attitude toward policy positions of an important segment of the people. They believe, with Linda, that candidates and parties have their "own agenda" and thus must not be "doing it for service to the people." People like Linda neither conceive of politics in policy terms nor think politicians should. They believe candidates with strong issue positions are unlikely to be "the right kind of person." The notion of searching and voting for a candidate with the most desirable policy positions is quite foreign to this way of thinking about politics. People are often confused (and therefore frustrated) by the proposals emanating from the candidates running for office. At the extreme, they even conclude that people with strong policy convictions should not be in government. Policies certainly are not irrelevant to American politics, but people are less concerned with the substance of public policy than analysts seem to realize. When policy preferences do come into play, they are just as likely to be endogenous as exogenous.

If not policy, then what? We believe people are more affected by the *processes* of government than by the policies government enacts.

This is especially true of their attitudes toward government. Dissatisfaction usually stems from perceptions of how government goes about its business, not what the government does. Processes, we argue, are not merely means to policy ends but, instead, are often ends in themselves. Indeed, with most policies being of such casual importance to them, the people's sensitivity to process makes sense. In Part II we address the kinds of processes Americans want, but first we turn in Chapters 2 and 3 to evidence supporting our contention that process preferences in general are important shapers of American political attitudes and therefore of the American polity.

manner. The findings we report in the next few chapters suggest that the people would most prefer decisions to be made by what we call empathetic, non-self-interested decision makers. Elites are not what the people fear; self-serving elites are. The people are surprisingly smitten with the notion of elite experts making choices – provided those experts have nothing to gain from selecting one option over another.

Claiming to know what the people want (even though they often seem to be saying something different) is presumptuous at best. Data do not exist on what the people *really* want, and we are fully aware that we are unable to prove our claims about popular desires for the political process. But we believe the evidence is at least consistent with our description, and we ask readers – particularly those who have been trained to believe the people want badly to get more involved in and to reconnect with politics – to keep an open mind to the possibility that the people might just want to turn politics over to someone else if only they could trust that someone else to act in the interest of the people as a whole. In other words, they might just want a stealth democracy rather than the direct democracy certain scholars believe people want or the special-interest quasi-democracy the people believe they have.

In Part II, we present evidence of people's attitudes toward existing processes and their preferences for alternatives. We begin in Chapter 4 by investigating people's more specific procedural attitudes, especially their reactions to a variety of possible reforms and their evaluations of various parts of the political system. We then move in Chapter 5 to the people's evaluations of the political capabilities of political elites as well as the capabilities of the American people. We find, perhaps surprisingly, that people do not think terribly well of American people generally and their capacity to govern specifically. We conclude in Chapter 6 by drawing attention to people's preference for a democracy that is not particularly democratic (but can be made to be if needed) but which renders it impossible for decision makers to act on the basis of selfish motivations. This is the key chapter, as it lays out people's desire for stealth democracy.

Attitudes toward Specific Processes

We know Americans are not pleased with political elites, but neither do they want to shoulder the burden of participating actively in politics themselves. When we asked our survey respondents to place themselves on a spectrum running from direct democracy to institutional democracy, they put themselves right in the middle. They want to take decision-making power away from elected officials and give more of it to the American people, but they do not want to get rid of elected officials completely. The problem is that this simplistic process spectrum, which we employed in Part I, is misleading because each pole contains something the people do not like (see Fig. 2.1). The right-hand pole is attractive to them because ordinary people do not have to be involved, but, on the downside, existing political institutions and elites, with all the accompanying special-interest-induced selfishness, are left to make the decisions. The left-hand pole removes all that diabolical, selfish elite influence but comes with a high cost of its own: Ordinary people are forced to become much more deeply involved in politics than they wish.

Imagine, instead, that this spectrum is disaggregated into two separate components as shown in Figure 4.1. Here, one spectrum runs from selfish political elites dominating every political decision to selfish political elites having no influence at all (notice there is no indication of whom or what would take the place of selfish political elites). The other spectrum runs from all political decisions being made by ordinary people themselves to ordinary people exercising no influence at all (once again, without concern for what *would* make the decisions in such a situation).

We predict that if people placed themselves on these two spectra, they would be well to the left on both; that is, they would prefer

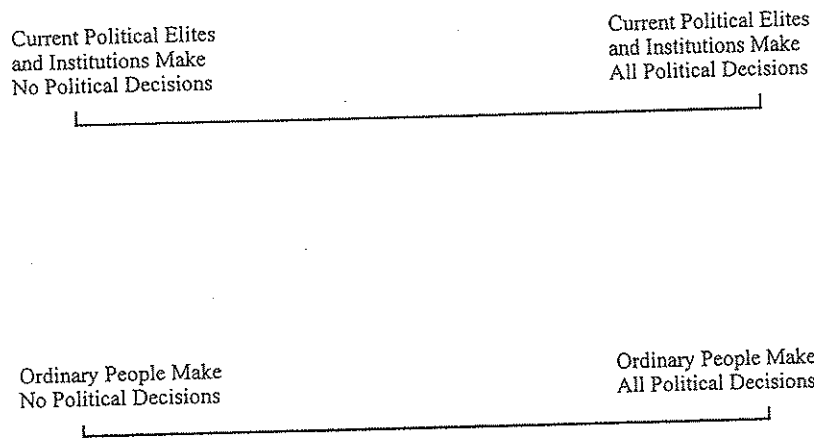


Figure 4.1. Preferred decision making by political elites and by ordinary people.

selfish political elites to have little influence on political decisions just as they would prefer ordinary people to have little influence on political decisions. No doubt they would be more opposed on average to current political elite influence than to influence by ordinary people, since the intensity of distaste for current political elites and their partners, the special interests, is difficult to overestimate. But, as we show below, people are far more opposed to ordinary people being involved in political decisions than analysts typically believe. The only reason it appears the people want to get more involved in politics is that survey items (including ours) generally force them to make a tradeoff between elected elite control and popular control. If people want to limit the power of self-serving elites and special interests, they can only register that desire by saying they want the people more involved.¹

In this chapter and the next, we tease apart people's attitudes toward political elites and institutions and toward the American people. We draw heavily on the focus group discussions as well as the survey results to determine the processes people seem to like and dislike. The focus group comments demonstrate that people have concerns even about reform proposals that are wildly popular in survey responses.

¹And efforts to place people on each of the spectra in Figure 4.1 would be unwise because people cannot be expected to know how much they want to weaken a source of power without knowing what is replacing it.

WHICH WAY SHOULD THE PEOPLE BE EMPOWERED?

Just *how* do people want to proceed with moving power away from existing institutions? Though it is clear that this is what they hope to accomplish,² this goal could be pursued in several different ways. For example, some may want to expand the use of policy initiatives that appear on the ballot. Twenty-six states and the District of Columbia permit initiatives and referenda, and some states, such as California and Oregon, use ballot initiatives regularly. Others may not want to wait for an election and instead prefer a teledemocracy in which the Internet or coaxial cables hooked up to television sets allow people to vote regularly on issues of the day. Others may prefer more of a deliberative tone to their democracy as exemplified by New England town meetings, with opportunities for all citizens of a small community to come together to debate and to decide on local matters. In many academic circles, these deliberative, communitarian approaches to decision making have become quite popular.³

Still others may not be comfortable with this level of direct democracy and may instead prefer to make changes in representative

²Better than two out of three people (807 of 1,180) in our national survey said the influence of existing political institutions should be less than it was at the time the question was asked. Only 14 percent said current processes were perfectly consistent with their preferences, and just 18 percent preferred a process in which elected officials would have *more* input. This imbalance is a far cry from policy space. There, more people were perfectly content with the tenor of policies (21 percent), and among those who were not, those wanting policies to be more liberal (45 percent) very nearly balanced out those wanting them to be more conservative (55 percent). So, unlike policy space, in process space there is strong agreement (more than two thirds of the people) as to the overall direction in which processes should move: away from existing institutions and elites.

³On ballot initiatives, see Magleby (1984), Cronin (1989), and Bowler, Donovan, and Tolbert (1998); on teledemocracy, see Grossman (1995); on deliberative, communitarian approaches, see, for example, Sandel (1982, 1984), Avineri and de-Shalit (1992), Etzioni (1996), and Tolchin (1999). For a good, if alarming, account of the overall growth in elite interest in "instant" democracy, see Weberg (2000). To illustrate the level of interest in alternative mechanisms for getting the people more directly involved in the governing process, the following papers were presented at the 1999 meeting of the American Political Science Association: "Defending and Protecting Initiative and Referendum in the United States," "Expanding and Improving Democracy through the Internet," "Philadelphia II: A National Citizen Initiative Theory and Process," and "Rejuvenating the New England Town Meeting via Electronics."

Table 4.1. *People's support for initiatives, term limits, and devolution (%)*

	Use ballot initiative more	Term limits for members of Congress	Shift power to state and local governments
Strongly agree	16	19	11
Agree	68	49	52
Disagree	15	29	34
Strongly disagree	1	4	3
Strongly agree and agree	84	68	63

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

institutions. For example, many individuals would like to devolve power from the federal government to state governments (see Hetherington and Nugent 2001; Uslaner 2001), believing that decision making on the state level allows people to be closer to the government and to exert more influence on what governments do. And still others may content themselves with changes in federal processes and arrangements, such as limiting the terms of members of Congress, reducing staff presence, cutting the power of committees and parties and, for that matter, limiting the power of anything that comes between the people and their designated elected officials.

The goal of increasing the influence of ordinary people relative to existing political institutions can be pursued in a variety of ways. How do the people feel about each of these various alternatives? Is one more popular than the others? We do not have information on popular support for each of the many important procedural variants, but the survey and focus group data do allow us to address the public's assessment of several distinct strategies.

Table 4.1 presents public reaction to three methods of shifting power away from existing elites: increased use of ballot initiatives, term limits for members of Congress, and devolving power from the federal government to state and local governments. On the basis of the survey, increased use of ballot measures appears to be extremely popular, with nearly 84 percent agreeing or strongly agreeing. Interestingly, focus group participants were substantially more guarded about the prospects of increasing the number of ballot propositions.

Though some were supportive, others adopted a view consistent with the following exchanges:

Linda M.: There's things I can read in there [on the ballot] and I can read it, and I can read it, and I'm still not sure. Maybe the language when they're trying to describe a bill or a . . . or when you go to vote it's like you think you should be voting yes, but no, you really want to vote on the way it's worded. I think sometimes maybe there might be an education - I'm not saying I'm stupid, but there might be an education gap in what people understand or what they read and what they're trying to understand.

Glen: Sometimes when you go vote on some of these bond issues and it's sort of like, "what're you trying to say?" I mean, you see this big long thing that's sort of like does this mean we build a school, do we build a street, or we don't build. . . . Some lawyer writes this big long thing up.

Cathy: This sounds good this way and it sounds good this way. I don't know. I end up leaving it blank because I don't really know what I want.

Andrea: I wouldn't trust everyone. . . . You see some of the decisions that people make just in terms of their own personal lives and you say, "hmmm, not a good choice." . . .

Alfredo: . . . The people that are not very intelligent relating to what's going on in politics would be swayed by a couple of dollars. . . . It just wouldn't work. . . .

Chris: . . . We are not all educated enough in every field to vote. I mean I wouldn't feel educated to vote on a good site for nuclear waste material, something like that. That's why we elect people to make those decisions.

These comments were volunteered in response to the moderator question, "Some people think we should move toward a direct democracy where the people vote directly on important political decisions and we wouldn't even need to have elected officials anymore. What do you think of this idea?" It seems likely that many of the survey respondents would have voiced similar reservations if given the opportunity. The people may want more initiatives and referenda, but this desire is tempered by worries over their own ability and the ability of the American people to understand the issues involved.

Although our survey did not contain numerous questions dealing specifically with instituting a direct democracy in the United States in a more concerted and regularized fashion than the occasional ballot proposition, focus group participants spoke at length on the topic. For the most part, they did not relish the prospects of being responsible for following and voting on all issues, and they had little faith that their fellow Americans could handle the task, either.

Moderator: One argument that's been made . . . is that we could have a direct democracy. . . . Every individual would be voting directly on policies. . . . What do you think of that idea?

Missy: Well a lot of people don't get involved though so maybe it wouldn't work, you know.

Bob: I think something like that would make people get involved because the electoral system to me represents a whole lot of power in the states that have a whole lot of people.

Linda: And so you're saying that what a direct democracy would give us is rule by California and New York?

Bob: Well I . . . I don't know. I really don't know.

Moderator: Any other thoughts about direct democracy?

Colin: So if we get 51 percent we can pass any law we want?

Linda: You said it.

Missy: That's just it though. What would happen if the 51 percent vote and the other 49 percent they don't like that vote and we have this big . . .

Linda: So you wouldn't like direct democracy?

Missy: Well I don't know. . . . There's a lot of crazy people in this world.

Linda: Yeah, shave your head.

Missy: Exactly.

Linda: Shave your head before you go to kindergarten.

Missy: And like he said, you know, somebody from a state that's bigger than ours. . . . And there's a lot more weirdos in California and New York [laughter].

Reactions to the prospects of coming together in groups to discuss issues with fellow citizens were not any more favorable than reactions to the nondeliberative style of direct democracy, as is indicated in the following exchange.

Moderator: What are your thoughts if we had a direct democracy such that every person would be making directly the decisions that affect us. . . . It would be like . . . a New England town meeting. . . . What do you think of that?

Cathy: It would be chaos.

Liz: No.

John: There would be a lot of violence.

Jim: I agree. I think it would be chaos because, you know, a lot of us don't take time to find out about issues. . . . That may work in a town, you know. A small town. I'm talking about 300-400 people where everybody thinks the same. You couldn't do it in [a large city]. And it wouldn't work for [his state]. And it wouldn't work as a national government.

Glen: We can't even get it to work in our family.

Linda: It sounds neat but I don't think it's feasible.

Cathy: It's not going to be effective.

Liz: Well, and I think the public, too, a lot of times is very short-sighted. . . . They want an immediate solution.

Linda: Right there, yup.

Liz: And they aren't looking 10-20 years down the road. . . . And problem change. And so elected officials are at least in a position where they can find out more about. . . . They have to look at the long term.

A participant in another session had this to say.

Carol: If you get this little kind of town meeting and these people are trying to vote against gay rights, do you really think the gay man standing there saying, "oh, you know what, I disagree with this?" I don't think so. I think he'd be quiet for fear of retribution. And I don't . . . also people that go to these meetings are the ones who really want this. What about the apathetic people. . . .

Or consider this exchange in which a person originally supported more direct styles of democracy but then quickly reversed his position.

Pam: I like the townspeople thing where it's more responsibility, you know more accountability, more conscientiousness, where we've got, we as people have to make the time. We've got to get involved because we're losing, we're, you know, we've lost the sense of family values. . . . Ideally like the townspeople thing, to get involved, somehow set it up so we're truly represented.

John: I'm fearful of the town, no offense to . . . you, but that kind of scares me in the sense that I think we need leadership. . . . With leadership, that going to somehow even that out because the interests of [the minority] will be somehow more weighed.

Paul: I agree there needs to be some representatives. I mean there are things that they are privy to . . .

Pam: Yes, I was going to say yeah.

Paul: There are things they're privy to that I don't have time to be privy to. I, I, you know, none of us have the time during the day to, to get into the issues as much as they do. . . . I don't think we could go about making decisions completely.

Pam: Because we'd end up with hanging parties.

More enthusiasm is apparent for reforms that would continue with the general approach of turning many decisions over to elected officials while moving those officials further from special interests. For example, many advocates think that limiting the number of terms members of Congress can serve would weaken the connectic

between members of Congress and special interests (but see Will 1992). According to our survey (and several others), term limits are supported by just over two-thirds of the public. Given this level of support in the national sample, it is not surprising that when term limits for legislators did come up, focus group participants tended to be enthusiastic about them. Cary said: "I favor term limitations, regardless of how good a person is in office. I say a constant turnover is good. Then you get a more variety of candidates." The surprising thing, perhaps, is that term limits did not come up that often, even when people were asked for reform ideas. People still prefer limiting terms, but the issue is not as salient as it was in the early 1990s.

Shifting power from the federal government to state and local governments is favored by nearly as many people as term limits (63 percent of respondents in the national sample). Focus group participants were also supportive, though not without concerns. The following exchange is illustrative.

Dave: It [state government] is closer to home. That's one advantage. I mean you've got people you're a little closer to, and you can reach a little easier to promote things, you might say on a state-wide basis rather than having to be in Washington, where you're dealing with your senators and representatives, but I guess there's some advantages to that.

Linda: Well, you have to have some things done nationally -- like defense. I mean we can't have 50 different little defenses, can we? So there has to be . . . each one has a role to play. . . .

Moderator: So you think leave it as it is?

Roger: A bit more involvement by the state. I think there's more things that the state government could do. . . . [The federal government has] so much involvement in the state level governments that it takes up time and energy and money and everything too. It's stupid.

More ambivalence, as well as lessons in history, civics, and theology, is contained in the remarks emanating from another focus group.

Moderator: Would you like to see power switched from the national government to state and local governments?

Erin: No.

Missy: No.

Erin: In some areas, yes.

Bob: Well the problem with that is once the feds submit their guidelines to you, you know, or once you agree to take that money, then they put all kinds of strings on you.

Missy: I like the government where it is. I wouldn't want to see it changed. Maybe a few things, but, you know, nothing major like that. No.

Adrienne: Do you think that if it did change, this state, it would be kind of cliquey? Because you'd know, I think that maybe it would be a little scary because the people that were appointed they might, especially if you live in like a smaller area, they might want to like only look out for . . .

Linda: Cliquey?

Adrienne: Yeah. Well it's all cliquey, but I mean I think it would be even more so because of . . . I just, I just, I don't know. I don't know what I'm saying.

Erin: Does that mean that each state would have their own laws?

Beth: Yeah, so that . . .

Colin: They do. They do right now.

Erin: True, but I mean the federal government doesn't oversee those laws.

Colin: No, they don't. States are above the federal government. We've got to understand where we came from. Before we left England, before we separated from England there was a long period of time when we didn't have a Constitution. We didn't have the, the 1787 Convention.

Linda: 1981 to 1987, 1787.

Colin: The idea's first. First comes God. Then man was created by God. Man got together for his own good and created a state, in this case the original 13, the brief version. And those 13 states got together and said, "For our own good let's create a federal government." So the states are above the federal government. The federal government is supposed to serve and facilitate the states.

In sum, the people's process preferences are not as populist as they initially appeared. True, their desire to reduce the level of discretion of elected officials is undiminished. We asked people to agree or disagree with the following statement: "Members of Congress should do what they think is best regardless of what the people in their district want." This notion of a pure Burkean trustee model of government is clearly not what the people want, as four out of every five respondents (80 percent) either disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement. But when attention is turned to the precise arrangements for redistributing power, people quickly identify problems with the frequently mentioned alternatives, such as teledemocracy and New England-style town meetings. So the overall public sentiment is beginning to come into focus. A direct democracy? No. An institutionally dominant indirect democracy? No. Weakening existing political elites? Yes.

ATTITUDES TOWARD MORE SPECIFIC REFORM PROPOSALS

With these general attitudes in mind, we can proceed to an analysis of the public's reactions to more focused modifications of current

arrangements. What specific aspects do they want changed? Taking note of attitudes toward specific reforms will clarify the trouble spots people see in the current political system. Table 4.2 presents a sampling of the public's view of specific reform ideas.

In the table we see, for example, that the public definitely supports limiting campaign expenditures. People are often somewhat reluctant to strongly agree or strongly disagree with survey items, but with regard to campaign finance, more than one-third *strongly* agrees that "limits should be placed on how much money can be spent in political campaigns." Another 58 percent agrees, leaving only a smattering of dissent. The people want campaign spending to be limited. *Buckley v. Valeo* be damned.

The only other proposal that approaches this level of support is less a formal proposal than a wish that the media "quit focusing on all the negative news." Three out of four respondents signed on to this sentiment. Three out of five respondents believe the media do not let government know the people's concerns. The other reforms in Table 4.2, it should be noted, would entail somewhat more disruption to the current system and, perhaps for this reason, are accorded less support. For example, a majority (55 percent) does *not* favor banning interest groups from contacting members of Congress; only 46 percent long for a new national party to run candidates for office; and just 21 percent of American adults would like to see political parties banned from politics. The lack of enthusiasm for a new party is particularly surprising in light of public dissatisfaction with the current party system. Still, the real news from this table may be the significant minorities who do lend support to these proposals, some of which are quite radical. Specifically, one out of five respondents would like to banish political parties and nearly half would like to ban interest groups from ever contacting members of Congress. So much for the First Amendment right of petition to the Congress! This desire to rein in interest groups is hardly surprising given the widespread view that interest groups have too much control in the political system.

Nothing in the focus group remarks necessitates major qualification to these conclusions. Participants were eager to see the campaign finance mess cleaned up (one noted sarcastically that politicians listen only to people who pay \$200 a plate to attend a fund-raising dinner) and were quite critical of the media, including what they saw as unnecessary negativity and prying into the lives of

Table 4.2. Public evaluations of reforming the linkage mechanisms (%)

	Limit campaign spending	Ban interest groups from contacting MCs	Special interests have too much control	Ban political parties	Need a new national party	Media should quit focusing on the negative	Media does well letting government know the people's concerns
Strongly agree	36	9	19	3	5	22	2
Agree	58	36	58	18	41	55	37
Disagree	7	50	22	70	49	21	49
Strongly disagree	0	4	1	10	5	2	12
Strongly agree and agree	92	45	77	21	46	77	39

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

politicians. Neither were participants reluctant to place some of the blame for the problems of the political system on the political parties.

Moderator: If you could devise an ideal government... what would it look like?

John: Something that does away with... maybe adding a third political party. Something that kind of does away with the whole, you know, the bipartisan, Democrat and Republicans. And I think government [would be] much more effective if there wasn't that constant... Not that there wouldn't be with three parties, but I think it might even out more. So there'd be less time wasted, less energy wasted on just the constant fighting between parties.

Linda: And even in between their own parties they sometimes can't come to a good answer, and they can't come to a... you know, they bicker between, you know, their own party. It's like, wait a minute, are you with me, are you against me, you know, it just doesn't seem like it's... [drifts off].

But the level of animosity toward the media and toward political parties cannot measure up to that directed at interest groups, or, to use the public's preferred phrase, special interests. We reproduce just one of many focus group dialogues about special interests.

Bessie: Interest groups control government. The groups with the most amount of money, the most political clout, they say when.

Robert: I agree with that. I think interest groups... have too much control of what our elected officials say in our government. If you have enough money, and you can give them enough money for their campaigns, then they're going to get you to sway your vote... I don't understand why some interest groups are allowed to give millions and millions of dollars and other groups can't afford to do that so they are, they can't represent the people they're trying to represent. And Congress people are basically just like, "Well this guy gave me ten million dollars, so no matter what I think, I've got to vote this way." They're bought, you know, bought by the interest group.

Many, many people see special interests at the core of the political system's problems.

PUBLIC APPROVAL OF GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS

We now move from linkage mechanisms to the institutions of government themselves. As has been documented previously (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), people have quite different views of the various institutions and levels of government. It seems likely that disparate institutional processes have much to do with the public's willingness to confer more approval on some institutions than others.

Table 4.3. Approval of the political system and its parts (%)

	Supreme Court	President Clinton	The Congress
Strongly approve	4	9	1
Approve	68	52	51
Disapprove	24	24	42
Strongly disapprove	4	14	7
Strongly approve and approve	72	61	52
	State government	Federal government	Political system overall
Strongly approve	3	1	1
Approve	67	53	56
Disapprove	26	40	37
Strongly disapprove	4	6	6
Strongly approve and approve	70	54	57

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

Specifically, the Supreme Court has consistently been the most favored institution of government, and Congress the least (with the presidency bouncing erratically, but usually being more popular than Congress and less popular than the Court). One explanation for the sizable gap in the popularity of the Court and of Congress is that congressional procedures are very open. Congressional debates and compromises are frequently conducted in full view. Disagreements are often public and vocal. The Court, on the other hand, conceals disagreements masterfully. Debates and compromises among the justices are not exposed to the public. Disagreements are private or contained in written, scholarly prose. Certainly, it would be hard to explain the Court's relative popularity by claiming that its policy outputs are more consistent with people's policy preferences. After all, the Court has issued tremendously controversial and often unpopular decisions in the past few decades (school prayer, criminal rights, flag burning, and presidential election vote counts, to name just a few). So process seems the likely culprit.

Our recent results provide additional context for the public's feelings about political institutions. In Table 4.3, we present the public's level of approval for the three institutions of the federal government

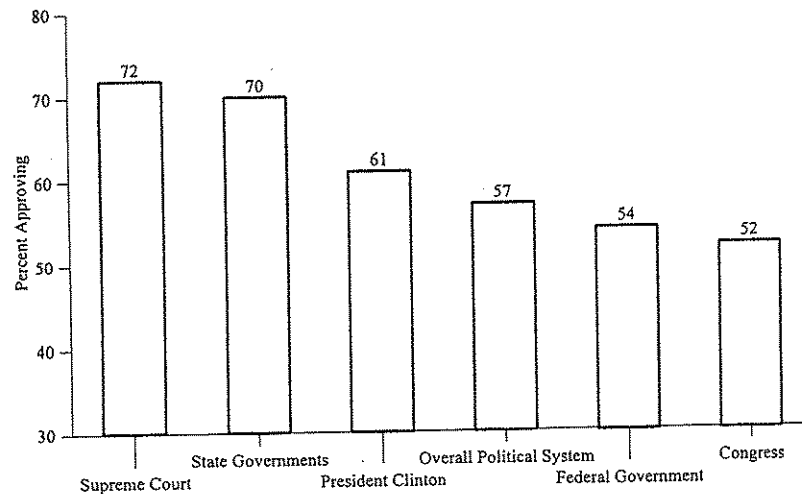


Figure 4.2. Approval of the political system and its parts.

and for the federal government as a whole, for state government, and for "the political system overall." These results are condensed and presented in graphic form in Figure 4.2.

The Supreme Court continues to reign as the most popular part of government (72 percent either approving or strongly approving), with "state government" not too far behind (70 percent). President Clinton's approval rating was 61 percent. Remember, our survey was conducted in April and May of 1998, well after allegations of "inappropriate intimate contact" between the President and Monica Lewinsky first surfaced in late January of 1998, but well before the Starr Report was referred to Congress for the subsequent impeachment of the President and trial in the Senate (in September of 1998). Of course, most observers were surprised that Clinton's popularity was undiminished by the crisis and, in fact, went up by five to ten percentage points.

The "overall political system" was approved of by 57 percent of the population, even during this unsettling period of time, while the federal government received slightly less approval (54 percent, to be exact). Congress, once again, brings up the rear with just 52 percent of the American public expressing approval at the time the survey was conducted. While the pattern across institutions is interesting, revealing, and supportive of previous work, it should be noted that the level of approval of all these referents is quite high. A majority

of the population even approved of Congress. We now know that, in contrast to Clinton's popularity, Congress's was preparing to take a substantial hit from the impeachment proceedings. But starting in the summer of 1996 and continuing until the fall of 1998 (and then resuming after the impeachment brouhaha subsided), Congress enjoyed a period of popularity. It is likely that the cause of this popularity was the partisan cooperation in connection with the balanced budget agreement, the strong economy, and the lack of a desire on the part of congressional leadership to become enmeshed in controversy (Hess 1998). Once again, we see the importance of public perceptions of institutional processes. When Congress is relatively nonconflictual (such as after September 11, 2001), its popularity soars; when partisan or other infighting is visible (impeachment), its popularity drops (see Durr, Gilmour, and Wolbrecht 1997).

The larger point is that media and even scholarly accounts may at times overstate the public's displeasure with government. The popularity of the Court and state governments frequently can counterbalance the relative unpopularity of the Congress and the federal government, allowing a majority of the people to offer approval of the overall political system. Americans may not be fond of parts of the political system, but they are generally well disposed to the entire package.

WHO HAS TOO MUCH POWER?

While people may approve of the American political system, they do not think power is appropriately distributed. We asked our respondents whether they perceived various parts of government to have "too much power," "about the right amount of power," or "not enough power." The answers, though not all that surprising, are instructive. They are presented in Table 4.4. Focusing on the percent believing an entity has "too much power," we can see that the people's sentiments are clear. The main bogeyman continues to be interest groups. Two-thirds of American adults believe interest groups have too much power. The federal government is next, with 61 percent of the people believing it has too much power. Parties, as noted earlier, do a little better. A majority, but a smaller one (59 percent), see too much power residing in political parties. State government is in a different league from the other parts of government. Just 29 percent of the people believe state government has too much power, not that much more than believe it has "not enough power"

Table 4.4. Which parts of government have too much power? (%)

	Political parties	Interest groups	Federal government	State governments
Too much power	59	67	61	29
About right	36	22	34	55
Not enough power	5	11	5	17

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

(17 percent). The majority of people (55 percent) believe state government is right where it ought to be in terms of power.

Whose power should be increased? It comes as no surprise, given our results in Chapter 2, that respondents believe ordinary people have too little power in the current system (78 percent) and only a handful (1 percent) believe they have too much power. In the minds of the American people, a fair distribution of power would look very different from the current distribution. The people would like to see the power of special interests, the federal government, and political parties greatly diminished, though they are not so keen on increasing the power of state government. State government power is fine where it is, the people believe.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD THE OVERALL POLITICAL SYSTEM

We mentioned just a few paragraphs ago that at the time of the survey, approval of the overall political system was quite high (though not as high as it would get after September 11, 2001), thanks largely to the popularity of state government and the Supreme Court, but the concept of global or systemic approval is a tricky one. Therefore, it may behoove us to look more carefully at the public's overall likes and dislikes with regard to the political system. We have a few questions in the survey that fill this bill and they are presented in Table 4.5.

Nearly 60 percent of Americans approve of the overall political system. This finding makes it less surprising to discover that 62 percent agree that "our basic governmental structures are the best in the world and should not be changed in a major fashion." This is in many ways a remarkable level of approval for an enterprise -

Table 4.5. Public views of the overall political system (%)

	Our government is the best in the world; no major changes needed	American government used to get the job done but not anymore	Current political system does good job representing the interests of all Americans	Generally satisfied with recent public policies
Strongly agree	9	8	1	1
Agree	53	52	30	55
Disagree	35	38	53	39
Strongly disagree	3	3	15	6
Strongly agree and agree	62	60	31	56

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

politics - that is despised by most people. But before we conclude the American public is happy as a clam with its governmental system, we should take note of several facts. The first is the people's expansive notion of "major change." Indeed, Americans are perfectly capable of saying they want "no major change" in the political system while simultaneously advocating the banning of political parties as well as the prohibition of interest groups from advocating their interests. Many observers would consider these "major" changes, to say the least, but the people seem to view "major" as replacing a democratic system with an authoritarian one or replacing a capitalist system with a socialist one.

More to the point, responses to other general survey questions suggest there may be a fly in the ointment. For example, if a longitudinal perspective is forced upon the people, most of them are of the opinion that the political system in the United States is performing worse today than it has in the past. Fully 60 percent of the respondents agreed (some strongly) that the "American government used to be able to get the job done, but it can't seem to any more."⁴ Further, in terms of its performance in representing the interests of "all Americans, rich or poor, white or black, male or female," people

⁴Saying the U.S. government is worse than it used to be is a safer response than saying it compares unfavorably with other political systems around the world. It can be made without fear of being labeled unpatriotic.

Table 4.6. *The public's beliefs about the need for governmental complexity (%)*

	Congress needs committees	President needs staffers
Strongly agree	6	8
Agree	66	63
Disagree	24	26
Strongly disagree	3	4
Strongly agree and agree	72	71

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

believe the government comes up well short. Only 31 percent believed the statement accurately reflects reality. Relatedly, when we asked respondents whether public officials cared a lot about what "people like you think," only 28 percent (not shown in Table 4.5) said yes. On the positive side, a solid majority of Americans (56 percent) are "generally satisfied with the public policies the government has produced lately," as could have been expected on the basis of the findings in Chapter 1.

BELIEFS ABOUT THE COMPLEXITY OF GOVERNMENT

We conclude the empirical portion of this chapter by presenting responses to two survey items dealing with the American public's desire for governmental organization and infrastructure. They are presented in Table 4.6.

Most of the public concedes that "Congress needs to have committees to get its work done" and that "the President needs a lot of staffers to get his work done." But it is noteworthy that a sizable minority disagrees. Better than one out of four people (27 percent) believe it is unnecessary for Congress to have committees, and slightly more (30 percent) do not believe the president needs much staff help. For this many people to think the president, sitting atop a sprawling government in today's complex world, needs only minimal staff assistance in order to do his job is somewhat astounding. Combine these results with those mentioned earlier, indicating that 21 percent of the public wants to ban political parties and 45

percent wants to ban interest groups from making any kind of petition to the Congress, and it would appear a substantial minority of Americans has a truly novel, perhaps even bizarre, outlook on government. No committees, no staffers, no parties, and interest groups that are forbidden to express interests.

CONCLUSION

People want to decrease the power of governmental institutions linkage mechanisms (especially special interests), and elected officials, and they seem to want to increase the power of ordinary people (although we suggest below that this latter finding is misleading). They clearly do not want to do away with governmental institutions. The people have no desire for direct democracy, but if the options are for decisions to be made by elected officials or by the people, they are eager to give more power to the people since they are convinced that current governmental arrangements give far too much power to biased elected officials. In fact, people are so eager to weaken the influence of current political elites that they favor a variety of paths to get there. Expanded use of ballot initiatives and referenda is extremely popular with the public. Advocates often portray term limits and shifting power from the federal government to the state governments as reforms that would weaken existing elites. Both proposals are supported by two out of every three American adults.

In terms of specific alterations and reactions to the current system, people's primary concern is with interest groups. They believe special interests have hijacked the political process. The squeaky wheel gets the grease and the people see the special interests as squeaky wheels. It matters little to them whether these special interests are on the left or the right; the important point is that they are different from ordinary people and they usually get their way, or so it seems. From the people's perspective, ordinary Americans are in the middle, surrounded on all sides by shrill, demanding, and unrepresentative interest groups.

Thus, when asked whether the political system does a good job representing the interests of all Americans, people respond with a resounding "no". This is not because they are worried that minority views are going unrepresented. Quite the contrary. Most people are convinced that minority views dominate the system and that clear-thinking, salt-of-the-earth, ordinary Americans are ignored (more on

this later). They think that without so many staffers and committees and long-serving politicians in far-off seats of government, the system would be less likely to heed the wishes of special interests. Four out of five American adults think "special interests have too much power."

But do the people really want to empower themselves at the expense of political institutions? Initially, this may seem a silly question. Everyone wants more power, right? As we have seen, this is not right. The people could increase their power even more by striving for a direct democracy, but they have no desire for this. Indeed, the people often wish they could be exposed to less about politics and political decisions. No, the apparent desire to create a political system in which special interests have less influence than they do now is based on something other than a power grab on the part of the people; instead, it has to do with perceptions of the strengths, talents, motives, and capabilities of ordinary people as opposed to politicians. In the next chapter, by paying careful attention to the public's perceptions of people and of elected officials, we explain what is behind the public's desire to shift power away from existing political institutions.

Public Assessments of People and Politicians

Does the federal government have too much power, about the right amount of power, or not enough power? A meager 5 percent, according to our national survey, believe that it has "not enough power." Do the American people have too much power, about the right amount of power, or not enough power? Some 78 percent say "not enough power." An overwhelming majority of American adults would like to see power moved away from elected officials and interest groups whom they perceive to be so influential. The primary purpose of this chapter is to dig a little deeper into why the people want to weaken existing institutions of government presumably by granting more power to ordinary people. What is it about the American people or about existing political institutions and elected officials that causes so many individuals to want to transfer political power from institutions to ordinary people? To answer this question, we rely heavily on focus group comments, but we begin this chapter by presenting the results of several survey questions relevant to the task at hand.

EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO PEOPLE AND TO GOVERNMENT

If further evidence is needed of people's unfavorable reaction to government and relatively favorable reaction to ordinary American people, it can be found in a small battery of survey items on emotions. We asked respondents to tell us whether or not certain aspects of the political system made them feel proud and then asked whether those same aspects made them feel angry. Previous research has

Table 5.1. Emotional reactions to the American people, state government, and the federal government (%)

	Proud of the American people	Proud of state government	Proud of the federal government
Yes	77	56	41
No	27	44	59
	Angry with the American people	Angry with state government	Angry with the federal government
Yes	52	52	71
No	48	48	29

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

indicated that emotions play an important role in politics independent from cognitions.¹

This may be, but people's aversion to government, at least to the federal government, is negative enough and their fondness of the American people positive enough that these "emotional" questions generate responses similar to the more cognitive items discussed earlier. This conclusion is evident from Table 5.1, where we present the percentage of people who admit to having felt proud of the American people, their state government, and the federal government. These results are followed by parallel items for anger rather than pride.

As might have been expected, when it comes to a positive emotion (pride), fewer people (just 41 percent) have felt it toward the federal government than either state government or the American people. When we turn to the negative emotion (anger), the federal government is easily the target most commonly mentioned (71 percent). The American people, on the other hand, are the most frequently identified target for the positive emotion (with state government ensconced firmly in the middle) and are in a virtual dead-heat with state government for the least-mentioned object of anger. Interestingly, though, more than half of all respondents have at one time or another felt anger with the American public, so respondents seem to be adopting a realistic attitude. Of course, the American people

¹See, for example, Kuklinski et al. (1991); Marcus et al. (1995); Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (1998).

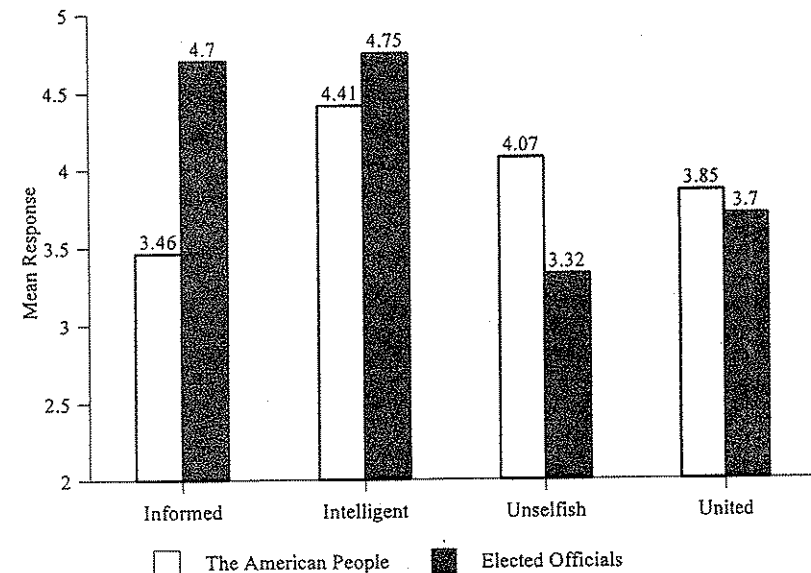


Figure 5.1. Perceived traits of the American people and elected officials.

on occasion make people angry, but they are much more likely to make people proud. The federal government, on the other hand, has made three out of four people angry but only 41 percent proud. So people's preferences for weakening existing federal institutions are based on emotional as well as cognitive reactions.

HOW DO THE AMERICAN PEOPLE COMPARE WITH ELECTED OFFICIALS?

But what traits do people associate with ordinary people? What is it about people that makes so many respondents want to transfer political power to them? Are they seen as intelligent, magnanimous, well informed, and consensual? More to the point, how do these perceived traits compare with those of elected officials, the group the public wishes to weaken by strengthening ordinary people? Preliminary answers to these questions are provided in Figure 5.1.

Respondents were asked to place the American people and then elected officials on four seven-point scales: extremely uninformed (0) to extremely informed (6); extremely selfish (0) to extremely unselfish (6); extremely divided (0) to extremely united (6); and extremely unintelligent (0) to extremely intelligent (6). A

reasonable hypothesis, in light of the people's stated preference for shifting power into the hands of the American people, is that respondents attribute more positive characteristics to the people than they do to elected officials.

To bring this into operational terms, we computed the mean response on each of the four characteristics for all usable respondents (low *N* was 1,245) so that we can compare people's assessments of Americans generally and elected officials specifically. Somewhat surprisingly, elected officials come out fairly well relative to the American people. People believe elected officials are much more informed than the American people. In fact, the gap between elected officials and the American people is wider for information level than for any of the other items. They also perceive elected officials to be more intelligent than the American people, although here the gap between the two is much smaller.

The American people, relative to elected officials, are perceived by the people to be united and unselfish. In these areas, elected officials lag behind, particularly with regard to being selfish. When attention is shifted to the raw mean, the American people score the highest on intelligence, next highest on unselfishness, then cohesion, and lowest in level of information. People view Americans as unselfish and intellectually capable but not in possession of much information. They view elected officials as smart and steeped in information but fractious and greedy.

A logical inference from combining these results with the fact that people want to shift power away from elected officials and toward ordinary people is that most would rather put up with uninformed decision makers than with self-serving and divisive decision makers. The implied sentiment is that it is better to have policies that are wrong than policies that are the product of personal greed and bickering. People judge the American public to be quite deficient in political knowledge, but this does nothing to derail the desire to give more power to these poorly informed people.

As a sidebar, it is interesting to determine whether public perceptions about the American people's lack of information are accurate. In our survey, we asked four political knowledge questions: "What job or political office does Al Gore hold?" "What job or political office does Tony Blair hold?" "Who has the final responsibility to decide if a law is constitutional or not: the President, the Congress, the Supreme Court, or don't you know?" And "Which party currently has the most members in the U.S. Senate?"

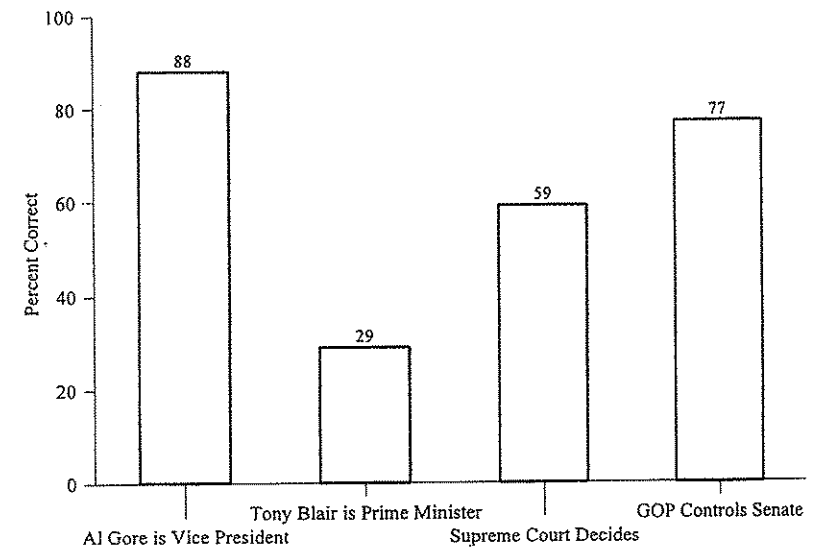


Figure 5.2. The public's level of information on four political knowledge questions.

There is no firm guideline allowing us to conclude that the people are either woefully uninformed or, alternatively, not as bad as respondents judge them to be. No doubt the results in Figure 5.2 will strike some as high and some as low. As of May 1998, some 88 percent were able to identify Al Gore as vice president of the United States, while only 29 percent knew that Tony Blair was the prime minister of Great Britain. The visibility of the vice president and Americans' traditional diffidence toward international matters make these results unsurprising. With regard to the final two items, it is encouraging that solid majorities know the Supreme Court has the final say on the constitutionality of statutes and that the Republicans controlled the Senate at the time of the survey, though the other way of looking at these results is that about one out of four adults is unaware of the majority party in Congress (when guessing between the two major parties would yield 50 percent correct) and 41 percent of the public is unaware of the Supreme Court's most fundamental role in the political system. It would seem at least a third of the people could safely be classified as uninformed.²

²A much more detailed treatment of the level of public knowledge can be found elsewhere. See, especially, Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) and Morin (1996).

Table 5.2. *Miscellaneous perceptions of the American people (%)*

	The American people could solve country's problems	If American people, not politicians, decided, the country would be better off	People don't have enough time or knowledge to make political decisions
Strongly agree	7	5	7
Agree	56	51	58
Disagree	34	41	33
Strongly disagree	3	4	3
Strongly agree and agree	63	56	65

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

THE AMBIVALENCE OF PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

A key finding of this section on people's perceptions of the political capabilities of the American people is that, even though the desire to increase the clout of ordinary people vis-à-vis existing institutions is widespread, this does not mean there is no ambivalence about shifting power to them. Quite the contrary; ambivalence is rampant and nowhere is this better illustrated than in Table 5.2. Here we see the answers to three survey items. Could the American people, if just given a chance, figure out how to solve the nation's problems? Nearly two-thirds say yes. Given the complexity and intransigence of many of the nation's problems, this is an astounding vote of confidence in the capacities of the American people. It is the "can do" spirit at its best, but the next item suggests greater uncertainty on the part of the people. Here, respondents were faced with a fairly stark choice: "If the American people decided political issues directly instead of relying on politicians, the country would be a lot better off." This question split respondents nearly down the middle. Slightly more than half the respondents, 56 percent, thought the country would be better off if the people decided, but this means nearly half of the respondents believed the country would be better off if politicians and not the American people decided political issues.

Table 5.3. *Public perceptions of the trustworthiness of the American people (%)*

Most people can be trusted	40
Can't be too careful in dealing with people	60
Total	100
Most people try to be fair	48
Most people would take advantage of you if they had the chance	52
Total	100

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

This ambivalence about the abilities of the American people is even more apparent in the next item where 65 percent of all respondents agreed that "people just don't have enough time or knowledge to make decisions about important political issues." Once again, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the desire to shift power toward the people is not based on tremendous confidence in the ability or willingness of those people to render informed and improved political decisions. Something else seems to be driving the desire to shift power closer to the people.

If further evidence is needed about the mixed feelings evoked by the concept "American people," consider the results in Table 5.3. Here the focus of attention is not the people's ability to process information or the time they have available to commit to politics or even their willingness to acquire information, but, rather, the extent to which ordinary people can be trusted. In Figure 5.1 we saw that most respondents believed the American people were relatively unselfish, certainly compared with elected officials. But this is not quite the same as determining the extent to which respondents perceive people as being trustworthy.

Two items in our survey seem appropriate for the task at hand. The first asked, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or would you say that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" As can be seen from the table, a majority of respondents opted for the less positive "can't be too careful" position and were not willing to declare that "most people can be

trusted." But being careful is good policy regardless of what one thinks of the trustworthiness of other people, and this may explain the result. From this standpoint, the second item might offer a better test. This item read, "Do you think most people would try to take advantage of you if they had a chance, or do you think they would try to be fair?" Even with this language, people express a guarded attitude toward "most people." More people believe "most people would take advantage if they had a chance" than believe that "most people would try to be fair," although the difference is small. It would seem the desire to empower the American people is not based on the belief that ordinary people are trustworthy. They are perhaps more trustworthy than elected officials, but this does not necessarily mean they are trustworthy.

PEOPLE'S COMMENTS ON THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

So, the public wants to give more political power to ordinary people even as the public openly admits that these ordinary people are often poorly informed, not particularly trustworthy, and only marginally capable of solving the nation's problems more proficiently than elected officials. This somewhat paradoxical conclusion begs for a more detailed investigation of the public's perceptions of the capabilities of the American people relative to elected officials. To acquire this more detailed information, we turn to the eight focus group sessions we conducted late in 1997. Of course, selective presentation of quotes could be used to make many different, sometimes conflicting points, and a determined moderator could coax participants toward certain remarks. These remain core problems with the use of focus groups (see Polsby 1993). Nonetheless, focus groups constitute one of the few ways to go beyond the terse questions and closed-ended responses that typically characterize survey research, and we prohibited our moderator from coaching. We believe a fair reading of the transcript from each of the focus groups we conducted across the nation, from southern California to New England, suggests a clearly dominant view of the political capacities of the American people. We begin with people's comments about the strengths and weaknesses of ordinary Americans and then move on to comments about politicians and political institutions.

We were taken aback by the extent to which focus group participants believed that the American people generally do not have the time, motivation, orientation, knowledge, and even intelligence it

takes to get up to speed on the political issues of the day, unless those issues might be of vital interest to the person. Previous writing typically has claimed that Americans view elected officials as incapable and ordinary people as both capable and willing (see, e.g., Mathews 1994; Grossman 1995; Kidd 2001). Our results directly challenge these previous claims. While some participants viewed the American people as capable, most seriously questioned their intelligence and information levels. And it was an extremely rare voice that said the American people were willing to shoulder the responsibility of deciding tough political issues. One often-expressed argument for this lack of willingness was that people are too busy to commit the time necessary to engage fully in politics. This sentiment is apparent in the following comments from focus group participants.

Jean: Well, we're not to blame. I would love nothing more than to sit down and read three newspapers in the course of the day. But I feel I'm too busy supporting this big machine that just sucks the money out of my paycheck every week. Realistically, I'm too busy trying to support this big business that I feel should be run like a business, with accountability, a little more balance.

Mike: We have people who don't care. They're like, "What's this issue? Oh, I don't care." You know, whatever. I want somebody who actually cares; I'm going to think about this.

Jackie: And I'm the same way. I don't read the newspaper. I listen to the news in the morning from six to seven, while I'm smoking a cigarette getting ready to get up and go to work. And that's all I know.

Others saw being busy as a major problem but were unwilling to suggest that people would become engaged if given a chance. According to these participants, most Americans are apathetic about politics – apathetic *and* busy.

Ernie: How many of us in here want to make a change by going to the government or how many of us can? . . . I think we're so occupied by trying to keep up in this society that there's not enough people who have the difference to go in there and say "this is what I want to do." . . . There is just not enough people doing what should be done to make a difference.

Tammie: Well people are trying . . . are too busy, you know trying to keep up . . .

Ernie: Yeah, exactly.

Tammie: They don't have time to worry about how the government's run.

Rhonda: People need to be motivated, too. Like every four years they get motivated around election time. They all get into all, you know, issues and stuff. And like they get into their rut. They need to be motivated every,

I don't know how you'd do it, because they would be more interested. Because, you know, you forget it. You put it on the back burner . . .

Mike: You've got so many things going on. Your interest level in government, when you get home from work and your kids are there, is nothing.

Rhonda: Well how would you get people interested? That's something we'd have to look at, too, instead of every four years, like I think, like me.

Some participants disputed the "no time" explanation, viewing it less as a reason and more as an excuse. People, they felt, could spend less time sprawled in front of a television set watching game shows or even the evening news that contains little "real" news, thereby freeing up time to learn about and become involved in politics.

Carol: You know, we say that we don't have time, but nobody goes to city council meetings. I had to go for a class. I had to go so I went. I don't have to go now so I don't go. *Wheel of Fortune* is on. I'm comfortable. It's cold out. So I'm as guilty as anybody.

John: And the other thing is, you know, no offense to you but . . . people in general are like, "I don't have time. I don't have time." But how many of us make time to watch *ER*?

Jackie: We're too apathetic and I think the media is a big problem.

Jill: Turn off the TV.

Robin: Well it's a great electronic baby sitter, you know [and the parents need it because they are] working so damn hard to keep their heads above water, they can't worry about government, OK.

Jill: And when they can they go back to the TV because it is a mental check-out. It's not, I'm not saying that these are bad people, [only] that you don't have to think. It happens to me. If I turn the TV on, I am sucked in for the whole night.

Ron: You've got so many people that are just blind sheep that follow everything that the media throws at them. . . . We are a very lazy society that wants everything given to them. . . . They sit in front of the TV night after night being told the same things. . . . You'll watch a two-second segment on the problems with Iraq and then they'll have a 20-minute segment on Fluffy the Dog that got saved by a little kid.

Focus group participants overwhelmingly agreed that Americans are uninformed about politics, a view that clearly reflects the results from the national survey (see Table 5.1). Americans know little about politics, but the explanation for this lack of knowledge varied. Some people, such as Ron above, blamed the media. If the media gave people the information they need, they would be better informed. Others blamed the complexity of the information they received, arguing that if information were presented in a more simplified

form, people would be more knowledgeable. And still others simply felt overwhelmed by the volume of information they received.

Wanda: Government should simplify some of the things that they are doing and directions that they are going so that the average American of a certain IQ can feel a little less intimidated and want to be a little more involved so that [people] don't . . . just give up and, you know, not get involved. . . . Keep it simple and I think there would be much more involvement.

Andrea: What I have a problem with is our Voter Information Books. They're about this thick, and you don't understand what they're talking about. . . . Why can't they just put it in plain English?

Linda: I get overwhelmed by the volume. . . . You want to do such and such. Well, you know, most people want to do whatever this issue is, this is a good thing. . . . But . . . you go through all these layers of this person's got to do this with it. And by the time it actually gets to wherever it's going, it may not even be what you first thought it was going to be. . . . It's hard to cut through I guess, all the politics stuff and the apathy and stuff. It's hard to cut through and see this is really the issue to this. And most people throw up their hands and go, "Oh well, the country hasn't fallen apart yet."

John: People are satisfied with their way of life and everything right now.

Linda: There. They've got a job. They got their car. They're living somewhere . . .

John: And they're going to let everybody else take care of . . .

Linda: Exactly.

Glen: And if this isn't going to impact me, I'm not going to . . .

Linda: But most people, as long as they've got, you know, they're going to school, or they're going to work or whatever. Unless it personally impacts them it's like, "well. . . ." They'll ignore it, you know. . . . It is, I think, it's very overwhelming. Just pages and pages of pictures of people and their kids, and their wives, and where they go to church you know and all this stuff. And you are trying to read all of it. And you get done, and I'm still like, "well, now. . . ."

A surprising number saw the problem of an uninformed public as residing not with the media or with the government or with the information people receive – and not even with the busy schedules of ordinary Americans – but rather with the people's intelligence and motivation.

Linda: I don't think most people are informed enough or smart enough to make all the decisions that have to be made. A lot of things have to have a lot of research behind them, and nobody has the time to do that unless it's their job. . . . Many, many, many, many people don't vote at all, unless it's something they really want like when we were voting on the lottery. How

many people voted that had never voted in their life? They wanted the lottery so they went to vote. . . . I do believe in elected officials, giving them the time and the ability to serve, and do what they're supposed to do, and research the subjects that come up. I'm not qualified to make any judgments or vote on EPA issues or things like that. I know nothing about it. I could vote on something, but I might be voting for something totally wrong, out of ignorance.

Mike: But, I believe at this point, as a society as a whole, we are more ignorant of our country than we were 200 years ago. . . . Our country was formed on the fact that there are certain people that, right, wrong, or otherwise, are more intelligent. That they know how things work. That they can make decisions. My decision, since I'm not one of them, is to discern who is, who I want out there. . . . People don't care. I mean in polls, people can't tell you, it's amazing, like 40 percent . . . didn't know who the vice-president of the United States was.

Lisa: Don't you think some of that though is because people . . . don't feel what they have makes any difference, so they don't care. They tune themselves out. I think that if one vote counted for one vote on every issue, that people would really be more interested in what's going on.

Mike: I think that's an excuse. Because there were times when I didn't vote. Honestly, it wasn't because I didn't think my opinion counted, it was because that was out of my way. You know, I had something else that I wanted to do that day. . . . You look at the sixties, you know the black community, they would walk and march, you know. . . . We here in this country have given that right up.

Robin: People aren't that bright. [Laughter.] No, seriously. Have you ever worked with the public? There are people, I mean they're just not that bright. . . . There's a problem when we have people graduating high school who can't read. . . . A weakness of the people is that we're not bright enough to get the picture, the big picture, or even the little picture sometimes.

Believing the American public lacks innate intelligence is a far cry from the view that people simply do not have enough time or cannot wade through all of the complex information they receive. Questioning the public's intelligence raises the issue of whether the American people *should* get more involved in politics. Some participants similarly questioned Americans' motivations: The American people are too self-interested and narrow, and therefore perhaps should not be involved in politics.

Jill: I think a huge weakness of our society is that people have the attitude that "you owe me." Government owes me, my neighbor owes me, every, I mean everybody owes me. And they don't feel like they need to do anything

for themselves. . . . Kids today . . . think that they really deserve something that they haven't worked for. I mean all the time.

Micheline: I'm real limited, you know. I have tunnel vision because what I care about is what's going on in my world. I care about what's happening in [her hometown]. I don't really care what's happening in Washington, DC. I want my streets safe for my kids. I want the roads safe for us to drive. . . . These are my concerns. You know, maybe that's selfish. . . . I don't care what's happening in New York. I could care less. I care about what's happening here. . . . That's what I care about.

Alfredo: The only people that are going to exercise their voice are the people that are being affected at that particular time.

Jason: That's right.

Alfredo: For example, the Hispanic community doesn't normally vote but then when an issue comes by, such as immigration law, all of a sudden the Hispanic community will rise up and become a voice . . . the American Indian, for example, they would rise up if something happens to their slot machines in their reservations.

Mike: Well . . . are we too big a nation to be governed by a democracy?

Pam: I don't think we're too big. I think we're too greedy and too self-centered, that we're not up to make sacrifices that it would take for us to be truly governed by a democracy.

John: I think our government was set up for the people but I think the attitude, kind of what you are saying, the attitude is now "for me and by me."

Pam: Yeah.

John: We're greedy about our individual aspect of what the government is providing.

This sentiment that the American people are too self-interested and narrow may appear to fly in the face of the survey findings we report in Figure 5.1. Survey respondents were much more likely to view the American people as unselfish compared with elected officials, yet here we see focus group participants strongly stating that the American people are selfish. It is important to note, though, that one-third of survey respondents believe the American people are selfish. The American public may appear less selfish at the aggregate level than elected officials, but there is a large group of people who are unwilling to categorize Americans as unselfish.

Perhaps of even more concern than those who question the intelligence and motivations of people are the individuals who are disillusioned with democratic government because they somehow believe it should provide them with everything they want. When this

eventuality fails to materialize, they withdraw from the political process, apparently unable to realize that no system could give every citizen everything he or she wants. Typical of this attitude is the following comment.

Ernie: I know the only kind of political background I had was my senior year of civics really, and when I took [indecipherable] at a junior college. But it was never an interest because of all the things, all the negativity you're always hearing, what you can't get in government. And then the last election was the first time I just said, hey, you know, I'm always bitching about this and this and that. So I registered and voted. You know and I think that out of . . . all the changes that I wanted, I think only one of them happened, you know. . . . I could care less right now. Because it's just like everything you wanted to see changed still hasn't happened. And I think I'm just like any other people, I let other things take my time. And it's like, [elected officials] are keeping in touch because I get in the mail, "Hi I'm representative. . . . This is what's going on. If you want to come here . . ." But I get them [and throw them away] because I have no interest.

Regardless of the reason people give for not being involved in politics, they are quite aware of the dangers of their reluctance to participate. They recognize their own deficiencies and the problems these deficiencies create for the political system. They are even willing to recognize that their apathy directly contributes to special interests having more power in the political system.

Cynthia: We get very apathetic in what has happened, so we lose our power by not voting. . . . If we have someone in Congress that is not really representing us the way that we want to be represented, by not voting, by not speaking up, we let it continue.

Liz: I still have the feeling that . . . special interest groups would not be as strong as they are if the regular, average citizen would just assert themselves more. And take seriously the responsibility of, I need to vote every time there is an election. I need to find out about the candidates. I need to find out about the issues. I need to be involved. I mean.

Linda: I don't think most people take time to read. . . . OK, you open the paper and here's eight different people, and what they're going to do, and what they believe in, and whatever. And I don't think most people sit down and actually take the time to find the issues.

Glen: You have to have confidence that they [elected officials] have enough information, that there was a reason why they did that [voted a certain way on a roll call matter].

Linda: They know those things that somebody at home maybe does not know.

What is notable about many of these comments is that the people are willing to shoulder the blame for their lack of involvement. No passing the buck to some institutional feature they might perceive to be mildly off-putting. The people are forthright in saying the problem is them, not a defect in the political system itself.

Jim: We pretty much have the ideal government. But I think what we have are less than ideal citizens. If people would take the time out to be more involved in the election process . . .

Cathy: You can't force people to do that.

Jim: Well, no you can't, you know.

Eric: I think we have avenues to contact our representatives, though. I don't think that structurally we lack the ability to let our representatives know what we want. We just choose not to do so.

Pam: Right.

Pat: I'm not Generation X, but I definitely am a card-carrying member of the disenfranchised, because I have, in a sense, opted out.

The acknowledged shortcomings of the American people led several participants to muse on the benefits of giving power to designated representatives, as is illustrated by the following discussion.

Alfredo: We have to trust these people that we voted in are going to make the decisions for us, otherwise we wouldn't vote for them. And then if they don't make the decisions that we want them to make, then we vote them out the next time around. So that's not a problem.

Jason: You sit around until your feathers are ruffled. . . . Logging industry? OK, Mr. Whoever, you take care of that situation for me. I'll trust that you'll make the best decision. Tomato industry? OK, tomato industry, go ahead. Car industry? . . . What do we know about these things? The communications industry? What do we know about these things?

Alfredo: Let them do their job.

Jason: That's what they're there for. They're there because . . . they know what they're doing. Do I trust them? No.

PEOPLE'S COMMENTS ON POLITICIANS

This last comment serves as a perfect lead-in to the participants' comments on politicians. Many individuals, like Alfredo, recognize the need for letting these elected officials "do their job" but, like Jason, do not really trust those officials. It is clear they do not have full confidence in the American people, but neither do they have confidence in politicians. It is time to look more deeply at the public's perception of the strengths and, especially, the weaknesses of politicians.

Many of the things the public dislikes about politicians are obvious and have been noted earlier, but the comments of the focus group participants provide useful twists on these notions and deserve to be juxtaposed with public sentiments toward ordinary people.

Disagreements among politicians are an important source of public dissatisfaction with politicians, no doubt partially because the media delight in presenting political disagreements as a failure on someone's part. As Kerbel (1999: 121) puts it, "when disagreement appears in the news . . . it is inevitably portrayed as problematic . . . when friction results, the media dutifully report it as a sign that things are malfunctioning." But whatever the source of the unfavorable view of normal political conflict, politicians' perceived proclivity for conflict is a key reason the public evaluates them as they do. Fighting is equated with an absence of productivity. Ben, a focus group participant, noted that politicians are "always fighting" and that "they sit in their little offices up there and hold their meetings every day but nothing happens." Junior responded by observing that "we get so many promises" and by making it clear that he felt the promises were seldom kept. Relatedly, most participants believed the primary source of bickering and the lack of productivity among politicians is special interest influence. In fact, complaints about the susceptibility of politicians to special interest influence could fill a book by themselves. Here we present only four illustrative quotes.

Lisa: I don't like the way they seem so easily influenced by lobbyists. I don't . . . there should be a better way that money and influential groups that have a lot of money shouldn't be, shouldn't be able to influence the decisions that the law makers make so easily. . . .

Maria: They [politicians] think about who's in power, who's the dominant group. And they do the laws according to who's going to benefit from it.

Kelly: It's the loudest people who get represented. The people who make the most noise, you know, the squeaky little [unintelligible] instead of looking at the big picture.

Robert: I think interest groups have too much control of what our elected officials say in our government. And Congress people are basically just like, well this guy gave me ten million dollars so no matter what I think, I've got to vote this way. They're bought, you know, bought by the interest group.

And here, of course, is where the other shoe falls. People believe politicians are susceptible to special interest influence not just because they are weak but because it is in their financial interest to

befriend special interests. This is how elected officials get trips to Tahiti; this is how they get to stay in office; this is how they receive lavish campaign contributions and gifts. One participant said he had voted for Ross Perot in 1996 because he felt Perot's wealth would allow him to be relatively impervious to the money that special interests dangle in front of politicians. He did not particularly like Perot but he loved Perot's pledge that "the people will be the only people pulling my strings. . . . That concept got my vote, you know." People do not typically distinguish between campaign funds and the personal funds of a politician. When they hear about large contributions to a candidate, the suspicion is that the politician as well as the politician's campaign benefited. Campaign contributions, they believe, enrich politicians.

The result is that, in the public's eye, politicians become enmeshed in a Washington system in which they spend time with special interest leaders, they solicit money from them, and they pander to their whims. As much as they deplore it, ordinary people have no trouble understanding the tendency of politicians to fall prey to this Washington system. Indeed, in an earlier national survey conducted in 1992, we asked respondents if they thought we just happened to get the wrong kind of people in Congress or if the system transformed good people into bad. About half of the respondents believed the system was exclusively to blame, and more still believed it was partially to blame. Many of our focus group participants even conceded that they would do exactly the same thing if they were elected officials. Here is how one participant views political careers.

Ben: They [politicians] come into this corporation thinking they're going to make all these changes, you know. They have the right thing in mind. You know they generally do, I believe. But then as they start seeing all these things around them, and they start, you know, valuing . . . well, that's [when they start wanting to be like a senior member of Congress]. . . . I want to drive that car and get that office and this and that. . . . And you have kind of got to, you know, do these things, cut those corners [to get there].

Whether politicians are seen as "wrong" from the start or "wrong" because of their exposure to the corrupting Washington system, almost all people are dissatisfied with the orientation of politicians. The main problem, people believe, is the fact that the desire of politicians to please special interests takes them into a world that is quite

apart from the world of the ordinary people they are supposed to represent. Many people fear that the money chase and the high-rolling special interests prevent elected officials from obtaining a true understanding of the problems of ordinary people, as is apparent in the following comments.

Kelly: The people who are in positions of power, once they get there, they're living in a class of people that are out of touch with what's really going on with the masses that they're supposed to be representing. . . . Even if they started out young and fresh and they had a good attitude in the beginning you absorb what's around you.

Maria: They [politicians] forget about the people that are down here, you know, in the lower class or the poor, you know, and how it's going to affect them.

In sum, the typical assessment of politicians seems to be that they are knowledgeable and informed but that they have been sucked into a situation in which their self-interest and advantageous position in the polity encourage them to enter a different realm. In so doing, they lose touch with ordinary people and instead become overly intimate with special interests. While politicians may have a grasp of the issues, their motivations are all out of whack. The result is that a cabal of elected officials and special interests consistently takes advantage of ordinary people. For people to have warmer feelings toward government, no policy would need to change, but these perceptions of decision-maker motivation would.

CONCLUSION

We have spent less time describing public attitudes toward politicians because the story seems a more familiar one. For some time, the public's antipathy toward politics and politicians has been widely known. Political observers write books to explain "why Americans hate politics" (Dionne 1991) and even refer to the modern era as "antipolitical" (Schedler 1997). Our survey respondents and focus group participants have helped to fill in some of the details, but the general description of the public's largely negative attitudes toward politicians will come as a surprise to few observers.

Our findings with regard to the people's view of themselves deserve more emphasis, as they are anything but consistent with a mountain of previous research and claims. Past work has stressed ordinary people's desire to govern and confidence in their own

ability to govern. It also often contends that the high level of frustration people feel with the political system is traceable to the fact that they are not involved in the political system on a routine basis. For example, Cronin (1989) claims that "for about a hundred years Americans have been saying that voting occasionally for public officials is not enough" (1) and that people "would participate if they had a better way to make themselves heard" (5). Miller (1991: 27) writes that "the pretense of American politics is that the people know best." Rauch (1994: 22) believes "the dominant key of political rhetoric today" is that "someone has taken over the government and 'we' must take it back." Grossman (1995: 148) refers to the "continued yearning of Americans to govern themselves." Citrin (1996: 268) sees the current era as being animated by a populist spirit. Greenberg and Page (1997: 5-6) believe Americans prefer democracy over other forms of government, since "ordinary people want to rule themselves." Barber (1984) is determined to make a strong rather than thin democracy by securing rich citizen involvement in governmental activity and decision making. Mathews (1994: 11) writes that people have been "forced out of politics by a hostile takeover." This alleged takeover, we are told, has been accomplished by a "professional political class" (15) consisting of lobbyists, the media, and constantly campaigning politicians and has made the people eager to reconnect with the political system, to debate issues, and to meet frequently with their neighbors about societal problems. In fact, Mathews (1994: ch. 6) believes the main task of reformers should be to find a place for these meetings. Given people's desire to meet and to talk and to be informed about politics, a place to do it is all we need. Kidd (2001: 5) asserts that "today . . . the cry of the people to be let in - to be able to share in the ruling of themselves - continues to be heard."

Not only does past work claim people want to be involved in politics, but it also believes they are far more capable than elected officials. Becker and Slaton (2000: 3), for example, believe that "citizens are . . . well beyond and above narrowly selfish interests, institutional pressures, and the nearsightedness of elites. . . . Deliberative citizenries are far wiser and fairer than any political elite ever could be."

The evidence we have obtained from listening to the people themselves points toward quite a different conclusion. It is true that people are skeptical of the professional political class. We are in total concurrence with conventional wisdom on this point. But the notion that the people are champing at the bit to get back into politics on

a personal level is simply wrong.³ The truth of the matter is that the people themselves, not just arrogant members of the political class, have sizable reservations about empowering ordinary people. People overwhelmingly admit that they and the American people generally are largely uninformed about political matters. They also have reservations about the trustworthiness of the American people, with half of the people not trusting their fellow citizens. People are not at all certain that the "country would be better off if the American people rather than politicians decided important political matters." In fact, just as many people disagree with this statement as agree.

The open-ended comments of ordinary Americans in our focus group sessions are even more revealing of their true views of the political moxie and motivations of ordinary people. The overall impression is apparent in the comments we now list seriatim. These comments hardly suggest popular confidence in the political capabilities and motivations of the American public.

Ron: We are a very lazy society that wants everything given to them.

Maria: A lot of people, they don't want to be informed.

Eric: We have avenues to contact our representatives . . . we just choose not to.

Jackie: We're too apathetic. . . .

Mike: There were times I didn't vote. Honestly, it wasn't because I didn't think my opinion counted, it was because that was out of my way. You know, I had something else that I wanted to do that day.

Robin: People aren't very bright.

Mike: We have people who don't care.

Chuck: I think the biggest problem with our government is not the government, it's the people. . . . We really don't care to take an active role and it don't bother us, you know, as long as it doesn't directly affect me. Just leave me alone.

Glen: And if this isn't going to impact me, I'm not going to [get involved in politics].

Cary: See, we're all concerned about survival, what we have to do 8 hours a day in order to make . . . meet bills, and therefore, regardless of what's taking place across town that really irritates you, you say, "well that's across the town." Let me do my 8 hours and do my thing rather than really getting involved.

Jill: I think a huge weakness of our society is that people have the attitude that "you owe me." . . . And they don't feel like they need to do anything for themselves.

³For additional evidence supporting our claims, see Morin (1996).

When juxtaposed with the usual pandering statements from politicians and many elite observers regarding the noble, diligent, capable, and yearning-to-be-involved masses, these amazingly forthright self-assessments are jarring and revealing. People themselves believe that people aren't very bright, they don't care, they are lazy, they are selfish, they want to be left alone, and they don't want to be informed. People are self-effacing. They do not need to gloss over their shortcomings, as politicians must gloss over people's shortcomings. They know they should be involved in politics and they know they are doing damage by not being involved. They understand that their lack of involvement has made possible the very dominance of special interests that they despise. To be sure, some people feel they were driven out by flaws, real and perceived, in the system, but many concede that the professional political class did not commit a hostile takeover. Rather, the people admit that the politicians were invited in. Moreover, people recognize that the influence of the professional political class is at least partially beneficial. Thanks to representatives, people do not need to be constantly bothering with a lot of issues about which they do not care. Since individuals are often too uninformed, unmotivated, or narrow to exert appropriate political influence, politicians *should* make the decisions for us, at least that is the sentiment of a surprising number of focus group respondents.

People do *not* universally agree that they have been forced out of politics. A large number, in fact, would prefer to have nothing to do with politics and therefore readily admit that they opted out. They support a division of labor in which others are designated to deal with political matters so that ordinary people can go on with their lives. Unlike academics, most people are not consumed with a desire to figure out ways in which ordinary Americans could become more involved in politics. Consider the following focus group exchange.

Michelene: When I leave here, when I walk out this door, I'm not going to volunteer for anything. I'm not going to get involved in anything. I mean I know this. I'm not going to pretend I'm some political activist. I'm lazy. I'm not going to do it. I'm too busy obsessing on other things going on in my life.

Robin: That's how most people are.

Michelene: I am. So somebody's got to do it and I don't care how much money they [politicians] make, you know. . . . I don't resent the money because I don't want the job. I'm not interested in it.

While the general thrust of Michelene's sentiments is similar to those of many, many others, she goes farther than most. Most people *do* resent the money that is made by politicians and most are not willing to turn over all decision-making authority to them. Indeed, even in the face of people's quite negative perceptions of the American people and the desire for others to take care of political problems for them, most people (again, unlike Michelene) still seem to want to shift power from institutions and elected officials toward ordinary Americans. Explaining this unusual combination of sentiments is, in many respects, the key to understanding the kind of government people want, and this challenging task is the one we tackle in the next chapter.

Americans' Desire for Stealth Democracy

Whereas in Chapters 4 and 5 we stuck closely to the data, reporting survey and focus group results on citizen sentiments toward various aspects of the political system, in this chapter on the larger picture of people's process preferences we take some interpretational liberties. This is by necessity. After all, determining why so many Americans appear to want to empower a group of which they think so little (ordinary people) is not information that can be readily obtained via a pat survey item. As such, our interpretation of admittedly circumstantial data should be taken for what it is. At the same time, it is only fair to point out that the widespread belief that the American people want to empower ordinary people because they believe they would do a better job making political decisions than elites is based on an interpretation as well – or, as we argue below, on a serious misinterpretation. Regardless, unraveling the American people's perceptions and preferences on this point is the key to understanding the kind of governmental process they really want.

Many people do not believe their fellow citizens to be particularly noble, trustworthy, informed, or competent. At the same time, two-thirds of the American public believes the input of these flawed citizens should be increased at the expense of input from elected officials and political institutions. But even as the people call for giving more influence to people like them, they make it clear that they would prefer not to be much involved in political decision making. When it comes to politics, many people want, as one focus group participant put it, "to be left alone." But if this desire to be left alone is as common as we imply, how can nearly 84 percent of American adults support greater use of direct democracy in the form of ballot initiatives and referenda?

Our explanation of this puzzling confluence of views is relatively straightforward. People's most intense desire for the political process is that it not take advantage of them by allowing certain entities such as special interests and elected officials to reap personal gains at the expense of ordinary people like themselves. Increasingly, scholars are realizing that the desire to avoid being played for a sucker is an intensely held human motivation (for a good review, see Guth and Tietz 1990). And rank-and-file Americans believe the existing structures of American politics allow ordinary people to be played for suckers. Their strongest and most earnest political goal is to get power away from self-serving politicians. But identifying who should *not* have power is easy; identifying who *should* have power is another story. Conventional wisdom holds that people want to shift power to the people; our view is that this alleged populist instinct, this apparent desire to empower ordinary people, is largely if not entirely chimerical.

Not far behind "giving more power to selfish elites" on the list of disliked political procedures is "getting more personally involved." People indicate greater enthusiasm for more political involvement when popular democracy is presented as the only alternative to dominance by self-serving elites. As it becomes apparent in the unfolding of this chapter, we believe that if people were convinced that a third option were possible – namely, government by non-self-interested elites – they would take it in a minute. In pointing this out, we are not implying that people are typically prepared to articulate a developed sense of their procedural preferences. But articulated or not, it is vital to know roughly where the people do and do not want to go procedurally. We are certain that as much as they would like to weaken existing, allegedly self-interested elites, people do not want to empower ordinary Americans. Populist reforms will not lead to a more popular and legitimate government because they are not what the people want.

STEALTH DEMOCRACY

As is apparent from the evidence presented in Chapter 5, many people do not find politics intrinsically interesting. They do not want to reengage with the political process. They do not want to follow political issues because they do not care about most issues. As a result, people most definitely do *not* want to take over political decision making from elected officials. As Cronin (1989: 228) admits,

"Americans overwhelmingly endorse leaving the job of making laws to their elected representatives." We would take this observation one step further: Americans do not even want to be placed in a position where they feel obligated to provide input to those who *are* making political decisions. People appear to want to be more active and involved in politics only because it is one of the few ways they can see (or the only option presented to them) of stopping decisions from being made by those who directly benefit from those decisions.¹ People often view their political involvement as medicine they must take in order to keep the disease of greedy politicians and special interests from getting further out of hand.²

If Americans could have their druthers, representatives would understand the concerns of ordinary people simply because they are ordinary people themselves and because they spend time among other ordinary people. No public input would be necessary. How is such a system democratic? The people want to be certain that if they ever *did* deign to get involved, if an issue at some point in the future happened to impinge so directly on their lives that they were moved to ask the system for something, elected officials would respond to their request with the utmost seriousness. This, to many people, is as democratic as they want their political system to be; they do not want a system that is characterized by regular sensitivity to every whim of the people (and that thus expects and requires an attentive and involved public), but, rather, a system that is instinctively in touch with the problems of real Americans and that would respond with every ounce of courtesy and attentiveness imaginable if those real Americans ever did make an actual request upon the system. This form of latent representation, of stealth democracy, is not just what people would settle for; it is what they prefer, since it frees them from the need to follow politics. For this to happen, though, people need

¹In a famous essay written in the early nineteenth century but only recently translated into English, Benjamin Constant (1988 [1819]) argues that it is good that citizens no longer need to spend much time on politics. That way they can spend more time on private activities like commerce and they can "hire" representatives to look after politics. As such, Constant perfectly anticipates the mood of many modern Americans. Constant, however, believes the people are foolish if they do not look after the people they hire to look after politics. We argue that Americans are eager to avoid even this responsibility and become frustrated when they feel obligated to "look after" their representatives.

²There is even evidence that those who believe politicians are acting selfishly are *more* likely to participate in politics because the need to check elite power is greater (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001).

to be assured that decision makers are interested in them as people, are potentially open to popular input, and are not benefiting materially from their service and decisions. This desire for empathetic, unbiased, other-regarding, but uninstructed public officials is about as distinct as possible from the claim that people want to provide decision makers with more input than is currently done.

**IF I DON'T CARE ABOUT AN ISSUE, OTHER REAL
PEOPLE PROBABLY DON'T, EITHER**

A key factor causing many Americans to be attracted to the deferential, "don't bother me" political processes we have described is their disinterested attitude toward most issues on the political agenda (see Part I) and their belief that most other Americans are similarly disinterested. Psychologists and others have consistently found that people often perceive a false consensus.³ That is, people tend to see their own attitudes as typical so they overestimate the degree to which others share their opinions. This pattern almost certainly applies to perceptions of issue interest as well. Those who are not interested in any political issues tend to believe that most other ordinary people are not interested in any political issues, either. Those who are interested in, say, education policy overestimate public concern about education and underestimate public interest in other policy areas.

Evidence for such a pattern is found in the national survey. We asked respondents to identify "the most important problem facing the country." Responses were coded into 34 possible categories (see Appendix B). The most identified problem (crime) was mentioned by just 82 of 1,263 respondents (6.5 percent). Seventeen problems were viewed as most important by at least 20 respondents. In short, in the first half of 1998 at least, there was nothing approaching a consensus on the most important problem facing the nation. But when we asked respondents whether they believed "the American people agreed on the most important problem facing the country," 39 percent said that "most" Americans did and another 41 percent said that "some" Americans did, leaving only one out of five saying that "very few" Americans did. The perceived level of consensus on

³See, for example, Ross, Greene, and House (1977); Noelle-Neumann (1984); Montgomery (1992); Moscovici (1992); Doise, Clemence, and Lorenzi-Cioldi (1993); Baker et al. (1995); Glynn, Ostman, and McDonald (1995); Stringer and Thomas (1996); Parker (1997); and Glynn et al. (1999).

society's most important problem is decidedly greater than the actual level of consensus. Beliefs about extensive consensus among regular Americans were apparent in the focus group sessions as well. A participant named Lisa spoke for many when she concluded, "in the end, a majority will want the same thing, the same end." And another claimed that "80 percent of the people think one way."

Relatedly, people believe, perhaps correctly, that there is a general societal consensus on major goals. Since people agree on the big goals – affordable medical care, a growing economy, a balanced budget, a secure retirement program, an adequate defense, less crime, better education, and equality of opportunity – they believe a properly functioning government would just select the best way of bringing about these end goals without wasting time and needlessly exposing the people to politics (see Morone 1990). Indeed, the people's lack of desire to become informed on (at best) all but a few issues makes it difficult for them to comprehend any legitimate justification for intense disagreement on other issues. Consequently, when it is apparent that the political arena is filled with intense policy disagreement, people conclude that the reason must be illegitimate – namely, the influence of special interests. After all, the reasoning goes, people like me could not be the cause of bitter policy disagreements on all those issues because we do not care that much, because we do not see their relevance, and because even when a particular policy goal is important to us we cannot understand why bickering over the details of proposed solutions is necessary.

People's tendency to see the policy world in such a detached, generic, and simplistic form explains why Ross Perot's claim during his presidential campaigns in 1992 and 1996 that he would "just fix it" resonated so deeply with the people. Since, according to the people's perceptions, Americans tend to agree on where the nation should go, and since getting there is merely a technical problem, is it any wonder that people have little time for policy debate and compromise? People's lack of policy interests leads them to view policies in an overly broad fashion (if consensus means only that few people want high crime, bad schools, and a lousy economy, then consensus does not mean much at all), which in turn makes it impossible for them to fathom how any elected official who claims to be in touch with the people could care so much about minute policy details, especially when these details involve a policy area that does not seem central to them. False consensus makes it difficult for the people to realize that even though it is not central to them, a given policy area

may be central to someone else, and disinterest makes it difficult for people to realize that working out a detailed plan for *how* to achieve quality schools, crime-free streets, and low unemployment is the real (unavoidably contentious) question. Of course, there is a consensus on these objectives, but people's belief that policies designed to achieve consensual goals can be considered, compared, and adopted democratically without extensive disagreements is simply incorrect.

Too much has been made of Americans' middle-of-the-road position on individual policy matters. People who are unmotivated by policy debates tend not to know much about policy details and, when asked in surveys about these details, give neutral, middle-ground responses. It is true that Americans tend to be moderates on many issues (see Dionne 1991; Fiorina 1996), but it is also true that the appearance of moderation is exacerbated by the people's perfectly understandable lack of political awareness. People who adopt centrist positions on difficult policy issues tend to be less politically informed than people who adopt noncentrist positions (see, e.g., Zaller 1992: 102). A middle response is in many respects the safest response when information is lacking. If people would suddenly find the motivation to care about policy specifics, they would soon become both more informed and less moderate. Only from the dimness of people's policy-disinterested cave does the vision of consensus on real policy issues appear.

PEOPLE'S DISLIKE OF DEBATE, COMPROMISE, AND CONFLICT

People's overestimation of consensus affects the public's attitudes toward central elements of standard democratic processes in real-world (that is, nonhomogeneous and therefore somewhat conflictual) situations. Why should the public favorably view processes designed to resolve conflict if they deny the existence of legitimate conflict? If 80 percent of the people are in agreement, there is no need for debate and compromise. People would see democratic procedures as unnecessary and maybe even counterproductive because conflict is unnecessary and counterproductive. It turns out that this is exactly people's take on political debate and compromise.

Before providing empirical support for this statement, we briefly recognize an interesting group of people: those who simply are uncomfortable in the presence of political disagreement of any kind. For these individuals, the problem is not just that conflict appears to

be the creation of special interests; it is that they just do not enjoy confrontation and disagreement, regardless of its legitimacy or relevance. We are in no position to state the portion of the American population so constituted but it is important to recognize that such people exist. One item in the survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with the following statement: "When people argue about political issues, you feel uneasy and uncomfortable." Perhaps using the phrase "argue" rather than "disagree" boosted people's tendency to concur with the statement. Nonetheless, it is noteworthy that 26 percent of all respondents agreed (some strongly) that political arguments in general made them feel uneasy. We all know people who become visibly uncomfortable when the conversation shifts to politics. For them, the problem is not the nature of political disputes so much as the fact that they occur at all – even among friends and relatives.

Conflict-averse individuals are interesting to our analytical scheme because they are quite likely to support the concept of stealth democracy (anything to make it less likely that they will have to witness political arguments and conflicts), but, unlike many other stealth democrats, their motivation for being supportive does not require them to believe that debate and compromise are bad. Theoretically, at least, these individuals may recognize that debate and compromise are absolutely essential, but they still want to do everything they can to avoid seeing these activities, perhaps by boxing government decision making and putting it in a corner. In any event, as many as one out of four American adults appears turned off by political argumentation regardless of how dignified or noble it might be.

But the main source of the desire to make government a less visible part of people's everyday lives springs from people who do not mind political arguments in theory but who are convinced political arguments are unnecessary. Our prediction is that, primarily because of their perceptions that the people agree on the big-picture goals and that policy specifics are irrelevant to all but special interests, people will see little need for or value in the democratic processes of debate and compromise. Two of the items in the survey most directly speak to this matter: "Elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems" and "What people call compromise is really just selling out on one's principles." Responses are reported in Table 6.1.

As can be seen, the public overwhelmingly preferred action (86 percent) over debate. Perhaps it is not surprising that people prefer

Table 6.1. *The public's beliefs about debate and compromise (%)*

	Elected officials should stop talking and take action	Compromise is selling out one's principles
Strongly agree	23	8
Agree	63	52
Disagree	13	38
Strongly disagree	1	2
Strongly agree and agree	86	60

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

doing something to talking about doing something, and these results do not necessarily mean that the public is antidebate, but even with this wording it is somewhat surprising that there is not more support for talking through problems and hearing diverse sentiments before plowing ahead. Moreover, another item asked people whether they believed "officials should debate more because they are too likely to rush into action without discussing all sides." Even with the mention of the negative alternative (rushing into action), 43 percent still viewed debate unfavorably. Attitudes toward compromise were barely more positive. Well over half of the respondents agreed that compromise was the equivalent of selling out on principles rather than a needed concession to legitimate opposing interests for the sake of obtaining some kind of solution. Again, this single question cannot allow us to conclude that the public hates compromise. To be sure, in certain contexts people support compromise, and perhaps a term such as negotiation would lead to more positive responses. But the results presented here do nothing to disabuse us of our suspicion that the people prefer politics to include minimal debate and compromise, regardless of the groups doing the debating or compromising.

The comments made by focus group participants serve only to underscore the belief that political disagreements detract from the process. In responding to a general question on the strengths and weaknesses of government in the United States, a participant named Ben said:

I'll tell you just right off the bat the thing that I don't like, or maybe I just don't understand it, is . . . where it seems like you have someone over here

and someone over here and they're always fighting, although they're both supposed to be working for this common good. You know they're always, "well he said this and you said that," you know, bickering, and it doesn't seem like there's so much concern about where we're going rather than where each other's been.

Others expressed the same sentiment: "We need to have more decision making structure so that there's not so much bickering in government" and "Congress bickers all the time between the two parties, and they're always struggling for the power, rather than taking care of the issues."

The people's impatience with deliberation and compromise is an important element of the American political system. For most theorists, deliberation and compromise are at the heart of the democratic process. How else would people with initially divergent opinions come to agreement, short of having an agreement imposed upon them from a nondemocratic source? Our results suggest analysts need to recognize that even though Americans say they want democratic decision making, they do not believe standard elements of it, such as debate and compromise, are either helpful or necessary.⁴

FONDNESS FOR NONDEMOCRATIC DECISION-MAKING STRUCTURES

If our interpretation of people's procedural preferences is correct, if they are not suspicious of the concept of elite decision making generally but, rather, only suspicious of those elites who are able and willing to serve selfish interests, then people's desire to stay out of the political process should lead them to be surprisingly open to empowering any elite they believe will not be particularly selfish. From the results presented so far, it is obvious that the public believes current elected officials and other politicians are irreparably self-serving. Is it possible for them to envision elite decision makers who are not? To be sure, this is a difficult image to conjure, but three items in the survey make an attempt. These items are important

⁴In this sense, journalist Clive Cook (2000: 2444) has it wrong when he speculates that if citizens were ever asked what they wanted from the political system, they would reply, "give us an honest debate and choices between alternatives, and we will take more of an interest." Our results show that citizens do not want to see more debate and would take less of an interest if more debate – honest or otherwise – were provided.

enough to our argument that we spend some time addressing them. They read:

1. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people.
2. Our government would run better if decisions were left up to nonelected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people.
3. Our government would work best if it were run like a business.

While none of these statements advocates replacing democracy with a dictatorial style of government, it is fair to say that support for business-type approaches to governing or for turning authority over to something as amorphous and unaccountable as "nonelected, independent experts" instead of "politicians or the people" suggests moving in a different direction than the populist reform agenda widely attributed to the public today. Giving more political influence to successful business people and to unelected experts would entail a significant diminution in the influence of the run-of-the-mill American. If the populist argument is right, surely, the American people, with their desire for the people to play a bigger role in political decisions, would reject such notions out of hand. If we are right, however, these less-than-democratic options would appeal to a substantial number of people.

As is evident in Table 6.2, surprising percentages of people respond favorably to the mention of decision-making structures that are not democratic and not even republican. It may be possible to discount the enthusiasm of people for suggestions of running

Table 6.2. *Public attitudes toward less democratic arrangements (%)*

	Leave decisions to successful business people	Leave decisions to nonelected experts	Run government like a business
Strongly agree	4	3	10
Agree	28	28	50
Disagree	59	60	37
Strongly disagree	10	9	3
Strongly agree and agree	32	31	60

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

government like a business (as seen in column 3, 60 percent think this is a good idea). The concept of a smoothly running, directed, coordinated entity, moving with the efficiency demanded by market competition, may be so attractive to people that they respond in the affirmative without taking into consideration that the decision-making processes of most businesses are not accurately described as democratic. But answers to the other two questions are more difficult to dismiss. Nearly one-third of the respondents agreed that the political system would be better if "decisions were left to successful business people," and a similar percentage agreed the political system would be better if "decisions were left to nonelected experts" rather than to politicians or the people. (The mention of people in the item makes the response all the more surprising.) Some people, of course, liked both the expert and the business people options, but cross-tabulation indicates nearly 48 percent of all respondents agreed with at least one of these two less-than-democratic options.

Just short of half the adult population in the United States sees some real benefit to transferring decision-making authority to entities that are, for all intents and purposes, unaccountable to ordinary people. The question thus becomes, How can 68 percent of the population want to shift the political process so that ordinary people have more power (see Fig. 2.2), while 48 percent respond favorably to the idea of rendering the input of ordinary people all but irrelevant? Obviously, one solution is that the bulk of people who support the idea of empowering the people are not the same ones who support all but removing the people from the decision-making process. If this is so, it would be reasonable to expect a strong negative correlation between the desire to give more influence to the people and the desire to give more influence to entities that are not even accountable to the people. Alas, no such relationship materializes. The correlation between the desire to shift power to the people and the desire to give authority to unelected experts is -0.01 (n.s.), to give authority to successful business people is 0.02 (n.s.), and to run government like a business is actually a *positive* 0.12 ($p < 0.01$), meaning there is a tendency for those very individuals who want to give more authority to ordinary people also to want the political system to run like a business.

Perhaps the situation is better seen graphically. To do so, we return to the process space continuum introduced in Part I, running from direct democracy to institutional democracy. If we place people on this spectrum according to their fondness for nondemocratic

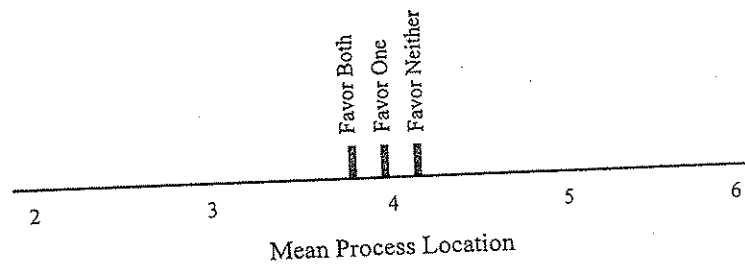


Figure 6.1. Process space locations of people who favor neither, one, or both nondemocratic process alternatives.

decision processes, an interesting pattern appears. As is apparent in Figure 6.1, those respondents who expressed a preference for both unelected experts and successful business people paradoxically also have stronger preferences (on average) for direct democracy than do those who expressed a preference for only one of the nondemocratic options. And those who responded negatively to both nondemocratic modes of decision making are further from the direct democracy pole than those who favor nondemocratic decision-making structures. Though the differences are not substantively great, they are statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) and they suggest that, far from being diametrically opposed, the apparent desire to empower people often cohabits with the desire to empower entities virtually unconnected to the people.

How can this situation be explained? Of course, people are perfectly capable of holding contradictory beliefs. They may want to reduce taxes and increase governmental services without increasing the national debt. They may want less government regulation but protection against dirty air, unsafe products, and misleading business practices. People's desire to increase the influence of ordinary people yet also increase the influence of business people and unelected experts may simply be another manifestation of the people, somewhat unrealistically, wanting it both ways. Perhaps this is true, but there may be something deeper at work.

We believe the key to explaining how large segments of the public can want to give more influence to ordinary people and also to business people and unelected experts is recognition that many Americans accept the (related) notions that (1) ordinary people are more or less in agreement on the fundamental goals for the nation and (2) governing is, therefore, basically a management problem of

determining how best to achieve those goals. The first notion was most famously expressed by Rousseau (1946 [1762]) and, as we have seen, remains a popular myth among both academics and the populace. A general will exists and is visible if elites, special interests, and other counterproductive elements are kept at bay so that the noble and consensual instincts of the rank and file are allowed to emerge.

Since the people agree on societal goals, no conflict need exist, and governing is reduced to the mechanical process of implementing a good plan for attaining these goals. Determining appropriate policy action thus requires no (and, in fact, is likely to be harmed by) elaborate institutions and powerful elected officials. Burke's trustees, with their industry and judgment, are not needed (1949 [1774]). Their industry alone is quite enough. Better yet, why not turn to unbiased, perhaps even scientifically informed experts to figure out the best way to achieve the public's goals? In so doing, the people are empowered and democracy is not weakened. James Morone (1990) may have best captured this aspect of the American belief system. He points out that the combination of "direct democracy with scientific administration is a contradiction only when observed from liberal ground. If, instead of clashing interests, the people really did share an underlying communal good, then both methodologies served the same end" (126).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, people like the concept of objective bureaucrats making their technical decisions. If people are responding to a perception that bureaucrats are taking advantage of people by not working diligently, opinion may be negative, but the general notion of a dedicated bureaucratic elite calling the shots on the means to achieve the consensual ends, even if there is not direct accountability to the people, is attractive. On the basis of his Federal Reserve Board service, Alan Blinder (1997: 115) recognized that "the real source of the current estrangement between Americans and their politicians is the feeling that . . . elected officials are playing games rather than solving problems." He believes that the people want more public policy decisions "removed from the political thicket and placed in the hands of unelected technocrats" (119; see also 126). Independent commissions and the like are always appealing to the people, and presidential candidates frequently compete to be the first to propose such ideas. People want to avoid government by people who act selfishly, not government by experts and elites (see Spence 1999).

The public's accepting attitude toward government by experts is perplexing to many observers. Michael Kryzanek (1999: 64) remarks that "already in most industrial democracies the bureaucratic elite . . . has pushed aside the elected segment of the government and now makes the key decisions about public policy and national direction. Under this model efficiency and specialization replace the uncertainties associated with democratic politics. What is more distressing is that there don't appear to be many complaints about government run by bureaucrats." Of course there are few complaints. This is what the people want, as long as the bureaucrats are not personally benefiting from the decisions they make. Why should people find government by bureaucrats distressing?

Reliance on independent experts, on successful business people, or on consensual ordinary people all move decision making away from clashing interests. Some people have a simple, definite aversion to conflict, and for them clashing interests are the source of discomfort.⁵ But even many of those who handle conflict in stride believe that most political conflicts are unnecessary trumped-up affairs traceable to the influence and narrow interests of powerful groups. After all, the people do not have strong feelings on policy minutiae, so any conflict must have been fabricated by self-serving elected officials and their ilk. In fact, people believe the very existence of conflict is a sign that elected officials are out of touch with ordinary Americans. Remember the comments of Ben, who lamented that "it seems like you have someone over here and someone over here and they're always fighting, although they're both supposed to be working for this common good." For Ben and many others, the common good should be self-evident, and how to achieve the common good is a management problem to which there is a readily attainable, perfectly acceptable, or perhaps even best, answer. The notion that debating among elected officials may actually be necessitated by their responsibility to represent the interests of diverse constituencies across the country is rejected by most people.

The important point in the people's thinking is that anybody *not* connected with biased special interests and self-serving elected officials would basically arrive at the same place. That is why the public is remarkably cavalier about giving more power to unelected experts

⁵See our earlier results and also Hartz (1955); Noelle-Neumann (1984); and Eliasoph (1998: ch. 2).

or to unelected business people. It is the same reason that ostensibly populist Americans give a puzzlingly warm embrace to extremely rich candidates. A 1992 Harris poll found that 55 percent of respondents agreed with the statement "Because Perot is a billionaire he won't be influenced by the special interests who make big campaign contributions." The people are comforted by the thought of a decision maker who is clearly not motivated by money and perquisites. They would rather center the political process around such individuals even if it limits accountability on the issues. Because many people have limited interest in most issues, accountability is not a pressing concern for them.

MEASURING AND EXPLAINING PREFERENCES FOR STEALTH DEMOCRACY

In a stealth democracy, governmental procedures are not visible to people unless they go looking; the people do not routinely play an active role in making decisions, in providing input to decision makers, or in monitoring decision makers. The goal in stealth democracy is for decisions to be made efficiently, objectively, and without commotion and disagreement. As such, procedures that do not register on people's radar screens are preferred to the noisy and divisive procedures typically associated with government.

Measures of support for each of the many disparate components of stealth democracy are unavailable, but the survey items described earlier in this chapter would seem to provide a reasonable start. Specifically, supporters of stealth democracy believe debate is not necessary or helpful, they do not view compromise favorably, and they are willing to turn decision making over to entities that are largely, perhaps completely, unaccountable but that promise efficiency and an absence of contention. Thus, for our purposes, stealth democratic tendencies are indicated if a respondent (1) agreed that "elected officials would help the country more if they would stop talking and just take action on important problems," (2) agreed that "what people call compromise in politics is really just selling out on one's principles," and (3) agreed either that "our government would run better if decisions were left up to nonelected, independent experts rather than politicians or the people" or that "our government would run better if decisions were left up to successful business people." While an admittedly imperfect measure, people who are dismissive of debate and compromise and accepting of government

Table 6.3. *Prevalence of stealth democratic characteristics*

Those with . . .	Number	Percent of all respondents
No stealth democratic traits	83	6.5
One stealth democratic trait	302	23.8
Two stealth democratic traits	538	42.4
All three stealth democratic traits	345	27.2
Total	1,268	99.9

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

by detached entities are clearly in possession of some of the core attitudes we are associating with supporters of stealth democracy.

The distribution of people on these measures is presented in Table 6.3. It is rather remarkable to us that only 7 percent of the national survey respondents are completely devoid of stealth democratic attitudes; that is, only about one in fifteen Americans values political debate and compromise and recoils from government by experts or successful business people. On the other hand, 27 percent hold all three stealth democratic attitudes and 42 percent have two of the three. At the least, the conclusion has to be that Americans' support for standard features of democracy such as deliberation, compromise, and accountability are substantially more tepid than is usually imagined.

What accounts for the fact that some people are markedly more favorable than others toward stealth democracy? We do not pretend to have a complete answer to this question, but if the arguments presented earlier are correct, then people who simply are uncomfortable with political disagreement, who believe most Americans agree on the political agenda (or at least on the most important item on that agenda), and who have virtually no interest in political issues should be more inclined to support political procedures in which they (and other ordinary people) did not have to take an active part. The reason conflict-averse individuals should prefer stealth democracy is obvious: Any method of reducing political disagreements is bound to make such people happy. And it would also be rational for those who believe Americans agree on the items most in need of governmental attention or who are too disinterested to appreciate the importance of policy details to be accepting of stealth democracy.

It is important to notice that only one of these three conditions (conflict-aversion, perceptions of agenda consensus, or political disinterest) needs to be present to push someone toward stealth democracy. If an individual is uncomfortable in the presence of political disagreement, it does not really matter whether he or she sees consensus or is politically interested, because conflict aversion on its own is enough. Thus, our key independent variable indicates whether or not political disagreement is disliked, unnecessary, or uninteresting and is dichotomous. It is coded 1 if a person "feels uneasy and uncomfortable when people argue about political issues," believes "most" people agree on the most important problem facing the country, or expresses "no" or only "slight" interest in politics;⁶ people who have none of these three attitudes or perceptions are coded 0. For shorthand, we refer to this variable as "negative view of political disagreement."

In addition to this independent variable, we rely upon a standard battery of demographic and political controls to help us understand variations in support of stealth democracy. More specifically, we include variables for gender, age, income, race, education, party identification, and political ideology. The relationships between several of these control variables and preferences for stealth democracy are interesting in their own right. The results obtained when our measure of support for stealth democracy is regressed on the main independent variable of interest as well as the eight control variables are presented in Table 6.4.

Beginning with the control variables, none of the demographic variables accounts for variations in support for stealth democracy. The coefficient for years of education may be the most surprising to many readers. It is reasonable to expect education to encourage an understanding of the necessity of debate and compromise and the importance of democratic accountability and thus for Table 6.4 to indicate a strong, negative relationship between education and support for stealth democracy. Instead, although the sign of the coefficient is negative, it is not even significant at the more permissive

⁶We repeated our procedures using an additive combination of these three variables, and the results are very similar, but the conceptualization used in Table 6.4 seems more consistent with theoretical expectations. Moreover, we substituted a more elaborate measure of specific policy interests (drawing on whether respondents claimed to "feel strongly" about preferred approaches to the policy areas of welfare and environment), but the complicated operationalization produced results similar to the basic interest measure, so we stick with the formulation described in the text.

Table 6.4. *Explaining support for stealth democracy*

Variable	b	s.e.	p
Gender	-0.02	0.02	0.26
Age	0.003	0.04	0.94
Income	0.04	0.04	0.29
Race	0.04	0.03	0.11
Education	-0.05	0.03	0.17
Democrat	-0.08	0.02	<0.01
Republican	-0.01	0.02	0.77
Ideology	0.15	0.04	<0.01
Negative view of disagreement	0.07	0.02	<0.01
Constant	0.53	0.04	<0.01
F	6.85		<0.01
Adj. R ²	0.05		
N	999		

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

0.10 level, meaning we cannot confidently state that, compared with those lacking a high school degree, those with many years of schooling are less likely to support stealth democracy. One possible explanation for this disturbing situation is that education may be collinear with the "negative views of political disagreement" variable. In other words, education may be associated with a willingness to tolerate political arguments, to be interested in politics, and to recognize that "most" Americans do not agree on the most important problem facing the nation. This explanation does not withstand analysis. The correlation (Pearson's *R*) between education and "negative views of political disagreement" has the predicted negative sign but is not large: -0.19. Education seems to be related to people becoming more interested in politics, more realistic about the extent of agenda diversity, and more comfortable with political disagreement, but it does not seem to be related to less support for stealth democracy. When the regression is run without "negative view of disagreement," the coefficient for education's effect on stealth democracy is still statistically insignificant.⁷

⁷ Given the importance of this relationship, we looked at the effects of education on the individual components of support for stealth democracy. In the multivariate

As described previously (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996), we believe at least part of the explanation for the fact that additional education does not clearly lead people to be less supportive of stealth democracy is the unfortunate emphasis in most schools on consensus. Difficult, contentious issues are often avoided in schools for reasons that are as understandable as they are lamentable. State legislatures, school boards, administrators, some teachers, and many parent organizations have apparently come to the conclusion that any program realistically confronting public opinion diversity promotes conflict and therefore is anticomunity and perhaps anti-family – as if the only way we can have successful social units is to pretend that everyone thinks the same way.⁸ Numerous foundations contribute to the problem by pouring money into civic education programs that teach only the details of governmental structure and badger students to participate (without giving them good reasons to do so). Unfortunately, these programs ignore conflict appreciation, so why should students come away with an understanding view of debate, compromise, and accountability?

In Chapter 1, we described results from an experiment conducted by Amy Gangl that showed that, when they were exposed to clear, even nasty, conflict, people actually were led to care about issue positions. When conflict was muted, people's issue positions were irrelevant.⁹ Extrapolating from these results to current educational strategies, if the message students receive is that no meaningful conflict exists among the American people, is it any wonder students' issue positions are largely irrelevant to their political attitudes and behaviors (see Chapter 1)? By adopting a head-in-the-sand approach to conflict, the educational community is unwittingly facilitating the lack of issue relevance in American politics and is encouraging students to conclude that real democracy is unnecessary and stealth democracy will do just fine.

specification, additional years of education do lead to more favorable views of compromise and to less support for government by "experts," but education does not lead to more favorable views of debate or to heightened suspicion of government by successful business people.

⁸ When she was a student in secondary school, political scientist Diana Mutz was involved in an innovative program designed to teach about conflict and how to deal with it. She reports that the program was sacked because of fears that it was proconflict and anticomunity (Mutz, personal communication).

⁹ There is a parallel here to Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1995) finding that campaign ads that play on conflict by comparing the records of each candidate are more informative to voters than ads that focus on only one candidate.

Returning to Table 6.4, it is time to discuss the nondemographic variables. Since it would be a mistake to assume the effects of party identification are linear, we included separate terms for Democratic party identifiers (34 percent of the sample) and Republican party identifiers (26 percent). Those identifying with a third party (a surprising 12 percent) or as Independents (29 percent) constitute the excluded term, so the coefficients for the major parties reflect the extent to which major-party identifiers are different from Independents and third-party identifiers (which, for the sake of simplicity, we refer to as nonpartisans). Interestingly, though nonpartisans appear slightly more supportive of stealth democracy than partisans, Republicans do not differ significantly from them. The odd-person-out is the Democratic identifier. Other things being equal, Democrats are significantly less dismissive of debate and compromise and are more suspicious of unaccountable forms of decision making. The surprisingly high level of sympathy in the American public for stealth democracy cannot be laid at the doorstep of the nonpartisan, since nonpartisans are not much different from Republicans (this conclusion holds true for each of the three component parts of the stealth democracy measure). And the aversion of Democrats toward stealth democracy is difficult to explain, since the effect is independent of "negative views of disagreement." In other words, the effect cannot be explained by the possibility that Democrats are more comfortable with political arguments than Republicans, see less consensus than Republicans, and have more interest in politics than Republicans.

In point of fact, Democrats are actually less comfortable in political arguments, have a less realistic view of the lack of consensus in the United States, and have less interest in political issues than Republicans. Democrats tend to have the traits we would associate with stealth democrats, yet Democrats tend to be the most averse to stealth democracy. Even in the bivariate specification, Democrats are less supportive of stealth democracy, but when the "negative view of disagreement" variable is included as a separate term, the difference between Democrats and the rest of the sample is, as can be seen from Table 6.4, substantial. What is it about Democrats that makes them more averse to stealth democracy? One obvious possibility is Democrats' historic antipathy toward successful business people. Since one of the possible ways we allowed people to indicate support for stealth democracy was to state that government could be improved by turning decisions over to "successful business people," perhaps

Democrats' distaste for the business community manifests itself as distaste for stealth democracy. While reasonable, this explanation fails. We ran the identical regression equation to that presented in Table 6.4 except that the "successful business people" item was not included in the dependent variable (support for stealth democracy). As was the case in Table 6.4, the coefficient for Democrats was strongly negative and statistically significant, while the coefficient for Republicans was not significantly different from nonpartisans. Apparently, there are deeper reasons that Democrats do not like concepts we are associating with stealth democracy.¹⁰

The main variable of interest in Table 6.4 is the one called "negative view of disagreement." It distinguishes those respondents who are not comfortable around political arguments, believe there is strong agenda consensus in the United States, or are politically disinterested. The presence of any one of these traits strongly encourages stealth democratic attitudes. As expected, people who are made uncomfortable by political disagreement or who feel it is unnecessary are more likely to believe that we can do away with debate, compromise, and accountable procedures. Willingness to govern via a stealth democracy, not surprisingly, will diminish if we can get people to tolerate political arguments, if we can show them that consensus does not exist regarding the issues that people believe need to be addressed, and if we can convince them that political issues are important.

Our claim is not that most people hold a tightly integrated set of process preferences, thereby allowing us to label them stealth democrats. People's thinking about governing processes is generally not developed enough for this to be the case. Rather, our survey respondents (and focus group participants) made it clear that they are unenthusiastic about representative, not to mention direct, democracy. In this sense, the central point is less that Americans have a compelling desire for a particular method of governing called stealth

¹⁰As would be expected, some multicollinearity exists between party and ideology (the Pearson's R is 0.31). But, of course, multicollinearity does not affect the sign or size of the coefficient, it only inflates standard errors, which raises the possibility that some coefficients will appear insignificant when they are not. Since party and ideology are both significant even with the multicollinearity, the danger to misinterpretation is not severe. Just in case, we ran the regression with the party variables but not ideology and with ideology but not the party variables. No features of the equation were appreciably affected by the removal of the variables, so we focus on the results with both included.

democracy than that most are only casually committed to traditional democracy. They think and say they are deeply committed, but when pushed, it becomes apparent that they do not have much understanding of the realities of real-world democratic politics. Most merely equate democracy with freedom and have not thought any more about the matter. They certainly have not taken on board the distasteful elements inevitably associated with democratic processes in diverse societies. These are the lessons people must be taught, not so that they will love democratic government – real democracy is not lovable – but so that they will tolerate and appreciate it.

Thus far we have skirted an issue that is of obvious importance to political scientists: representation. We have asserted that stealth democrats are not wary of unaccountable decision makers, and even prefer them to more accountable forms of decision making. Does this mean many Americans do not care about representation? In the next section we return to the argument we made in Part I that Americans do not care much about most policies. Since they are not policy-oriented and since they believe there is a consensus on the relevant matters facing the political system, we need to think about representation in more than a policy-congruence sense.

REPRESENTATION

By emphasizing process over policy, it may appear we are denigrating the importance of representation, which in most formulations involves a match between the people's policy preferences and the policy actions of those in power. This view of representation, we argue, is misguided. We believe the people want representation to provide them with something quite different from policy consequences, something that fits quite easily into their understanding of how the political process ought to work.

We begin by reemphasizing the extent to which people do not have a range of specific policy preferences that they expect officials to enact (see, e.g., Miller and Stokes 1963; Popkin 1991). Recent research underscores this point. Jon Dalager (1996: 509) discovered that among respondents claiming to have voted in the 1988 Senate elections (a presidential election year), "almost three-quarters of the electorate [could not] correctly recall even one of a number of issues raised in the campaign." Since less than half of the eligible electorate typically votes in modern-day on-year congressional elections, we are left with the conclusion that a tiny percentage of American adults is

policy-driven. Presidential elections may not be much better. A Pew poll found that, at least in the early part of the 2000 presidential campaign, "potential voters [were] basing their early preferences . . . more on broad impressions and personalities than issues." They found that people were not even making "a connection between a candidate and his top issue" ("Poll: Voters Choose Persona over Issues" 1999: 7A). The absence of positions on a range of issues is one factor that permits stealth democracy to be an attractive set of processes to many people. Thus, what most people usually want out of their representative is not particular roll-call votes or policy outcomes. Although people may feel strongly about an issue or two and they may get outraged by an unusually salient vote or action, it is a rare day that issues get an official in electoral trouble.

Elections aside, people are not that displeased with the government's policies. Remember that 56 percent of our survey respondents were "generally satisfied with the public policies the government has produced lately." What is more, pleasure with public policies is hardly a guarantor that people will be pleased with government. Of those respondents who indicated they agreed with recent governmental policies, 28 percent disapproved of the federal government, and of those who disagreed with recent policies, 29 percent approved. These 57 percent are people whose perceptions of government policies do not determine their attitudes toward government. No doubt there are many others whose approval or disapproval of policies and of government match but do so only because of chance or projection.

Much previous research has noted that people want more than issue representation out of government. This message has been ably sent by some of the classic works on Congress,¹¹ but our results – particularly, the focus group results – allow us to elaborate the general point in important ways. We believe what people want in terms of representation is not congruent roll-call votes but a general sense that those in government understand and care what life is like for ordinary people. Many people now do not believe government understands them, and the people most likely to feel this way are not those one would think to do so.

Richard Fenno's (1977) detailed description of the view of the representational process held by members of Congress demonstrates the extent to which the members realize that policy details and policy

¹¹ See Mayhew (1974); Fiorina (1977); and Fenno (1978).

congruence are not the prime desires of most citizens. When asked why he felt compelled to attend a local event back in the district, one member said, "People want to see the congressman – me. . . . I could have sent the most scholarly person I could find to make a more erudite, comprehensive and scholarly exposition than I made. If I had done so, the people there wouldn't have enjoyed one bit of anything he said. And they would never have forgiven me for not being there" (902). People do not necessarily want certain policy outputs; they want decision makers to care. But this quote came from a member Fenno took to be emblematic of a "person-to-person" style. Are constituent desires different in an "issue-oriented" constituency? Apparently not. When Fenno's prototypical issue-based member was asked what was important to his constituents, he said, "People don't make up their minds on the basis of reading all our position papers. We have twenty-six of them because some people are interested. But more people get a gut feeling about the kind of human being they want to represent them" (904). Exactly – and people's gut preference is to be represented by someone like them or, at the least, someone who understands them. They do not want someone who seems more interested in arcane legislative procedures and unusual, special, or what the people take to be minority-opinion concerns.

Whereas protecting minority rights and guarding against a tyranny of the majority have been important concerns of political analysts (see, e.g., Guinier 1994), the people are convinced representation is threatened from the opposite direction. Some 70 percent of our respondents in the national survey *disagreed* with the statement that "the current political system does a good job of representing the interests of all Americans. . . ." But, more notably, displeasure with the current system of representative government tends not to spring from perceptions that minority views are going unheard but, rather, from perceptions that minority views are dominating the political scene. Thus, many believe the underrepresented group is not those with unpopular (i.e., minority) opinions but, rather, those holding the majority opinion. As Margaret Levi (1998: 91) observes, "there is a danger . . . that institutions meant to protect minorities are perceived by majorities as discriminating against the majority." She is absolutely correct.

Statistical analysis of the kind of people likely to complain that the interests of all Americans are *not* being represented reveals that they tend not to be the "outs" of society but, rather, with an exception or two, the "ins." This situation is most easily seen for race. We divided

Table 6.5. *Perceptions of quality of representation by race*

	Whites (%)	People of color (%)	N
Current system does <i>not</i> represent all Americans	70	59	861
Current system represents all Americans	30	41	406
N	1,058	209	1,267

Source: Democratic Processes Survey, Gallup Organization, 1998.

the sample into whites and nonwhites so we could determine which group was most likely to agree that "the current system does a good job representing the interests of all Americans, rich or poor, white or black, male or female." As indicated in Table 6.5, people of color are actually more likely than whites to approve of the current status of representation (the correlation is 0.075, which is significant at the 0.01 level). With regard to race at least, minorities in the United States are more pleased with representation than is the majority. Moreover, the less educated and the young are more likely than the more educated and older people to approve of the current representational system, and men are not more likely than women to give high marks to the current system of representation (though it is true that those with higher incomes view representational patterns positively). So, if anything, the group generally seen as ascendant in American society – well-educated, middle-aged, white males – is the one most likely to believe the current system is *not* representing the interests of all Americans, though these relationships are all fairly weak.

The somewhat surprising result that "minority" groups are more likely to believe all interests are being represented becomes less so when we turn to the focus group comments. Consider the following two exchanges that came from an earlier wave of focus groups we conducted in 1992 on attitudes toward Congress.

Bob: When the President says I think we need to do this for the country blah blah and all that, they [members of Congress] ought to see if they can do it rather than work hard not to do it and kill it, right?

Delores: But that started a long time ago when they allowed the protestors and the demonstrations to come in front of the White House or wherever. They pitch their little thing and confuse the whole issue. And then everybody gets all excited and this has to be acted on.

Bob: The government has to listen to the 10 people who feel this way but that's only 10 out of millions. . . . We are the silent majority.

Molly: I think the vast majority of Congress's members have no idea really what the people's wishes are.

Steve: They are in touch with the extremes. Those are the people that they listen to and they're the ones that pull their strings, right? But the majority doesn't scream and shout.

The people are convinced that small numbers of individuals, either because of their ability to attract attention or, more likely, because of their money and contacts, can succeed in capturing government, thereby leaving "the silent majority" out of the loop – ignored and frustrated.

The reason dissatisfaction with current representational strategies is not concentrated among those belonging to racial minorities or those with dissenting policy views is that most people are not primarily concerned with achieving their policy objectives on a range of issues. Instead, people seem much more concerned with knowing that those in power understand what it is like in the ordinary world and can identify with that world's trials and tribulations. We were quite surprised at the extent to which people do not expect elected officials to solve all of the problems affecting them personally or the nation at large. People know that many problems are beyond the control of elected officials and that others are devilishly difficult. But while they may not demand solutions to these problems, they do demand respect, sensitivity, and understanding. One of the most emotional comments on this point came from Jean in one of our more recent focus group sessions.

The reality is until you've walked a mile in my very worn sneakers then you [cannot understand me]. . . . We're more in touch with reality than anybody in Washington or [her state capital]. I know in my heart of hearts I'm doing all I can; raising two kids by myself. . . . I know I represent a large majority of the people.

And two other participants even concocted a strategy for getting politicians to learn about the people they should be representing.

Tammie: They should send a politician . . . with a mom that works, you know, two kids, no husband.

Andrea: A waitress job.

Tammie: Go live with her for a week and deal on a daily basis with what she deals with and see, you know . . . just things like that. I think they should be

Jean, Tammie, and Andrea are not expecting that even the most enlightened government would be able to solve the very real difficulties peppering the lives of so many people. But they would feel much better about government if they were convinced that the people in it understood their plight.¹² People are less concerned with governmental solutions than they are with knowing that decision makers understand what it is like to walk in very worn sneakers at a waitress job. But too many people are convinced that decision makers know only what it is like to walk in wing-tips at lavish cocktail parties. This is what people want changed about government, not specific policies.¹³

But, to return to an earlier claim of ours, how can people imagine that unelected experts and business people would represent them in such a fashion? Surely, they are as unlikely as politicians to have walked in a single mom's sneakers. True, but in our formulation, empathy is a secondary concern. Before someone can empathize with our situation, that person must stop focusing on his or her own. In this sense, item number one on the people's procedural agenda is to try to get someone in power who either does not have the ability or the desire to act self-interestedly. For many people, even after the Enron collapse, the phrase "successful business person" evokes images of an individual who is already successful and, more important, who has not sought political power. Whatever else, such people at least did not begin with the intention of taking advantage of us and that puts them ahead of politicians, since politicians made a concerted effort to gain power. It is this desire for power that sets politicians apart and that makes people suspicious. As we pointed out before, most ordinary people believe that, if they were magically placed in a position of political power, they would be just as self-

¹²Lind and Tyler rightly observe that politeness and empathy are key parts of procedural justice (1988: 214; see also Lerner 1981).

¹³In one sense, Bill Bianco (1994) is on the right track in stressing that constituents want to trust their elected officials. But he believes the goal of constituents is to "ensure that their representative does what they want" in policy terms, so they "look for ways to increase the chances" they will so act (13). The evidence from our survey and focus groups leads us, on the other hand, to the conclusion that manipulating representation in such a fashion is far more than the people want to do. Trust for them is simply believing the representative will not act in a self-serving fashion and thus will (by default if nothing else) act in the interest of ordinary people. Of course, by stressing trust as a policy matter, Bianco is in good company. See Arnold (1990), for example, though Fenno's (1978) focus on a presentation of self (as the same kind of person as the constituents) comes much closer to the needed emphasis on procedural matters.

serving as the politicians are. But politicians' motivations make them suspect, particularly when the current system, in the opinion of the people, provides motivated individuals with a plethora of opportunities to be self-serving.

Although people are willing to cut some slack to a representative they believe to be personally attached to them, the prevalence of money, special interests, and office perquisites in the modern American polity means people are extremely reluctant to believe that the kind of representation they want can be provided by anyone who craves the power of elected office. Even if the eventual policy decisions are the same, people would rather thrust power at someone who does not want it than someone who does. After all, if the decision maker is not there by choice, people are less likely to conclude that the driving force of the decision maker is to take advantage of his or her position. People would like constraints to be put in place that would make it impossible for elected officials to become rich by serving. Failing this, they would prefer to secure officials who do not begin with a desire to seize the reins of power. In an ideal world, these officials would not be self-serving and they would also be empathetic. Successful business people and independent experts, though not necessarily empathetic, are perceived to be competent, capable individuals not in pursuit of power. That is enough for many people, or at least it is better than the kind of representation they believe they are receiving now.

STEALTH DEMOCRACY REDUX

Ordinary people have a different view of politics than political elites. The people believe that Americans generally agree on overall societal goals. While they realize that different opinions exist on the best way to achieve those goals, they are convinced there is a reasonable way of proceeding that can be divined by hard-working, unbiased, intelligent people. In so believing, the American people are viewing the governing process as the marriage of Rousseau's general societal will and the progressives' confidence in scientific implementation processes. More important, perhaps, is what the people do *not* believe the governing process should be. Some are not eager for candidates to offer any proposals at all (remember the focus group participant who noted that if politicians have their own "agenda," they may not be as attentive to the needs of the people). Many others do not believe politics should entail a competition of ideas, with candidate

A offering one set of ideas and candidate B offering another. Many people are not convinced a legitimate opposition is central to good government, because if governmental procedures were working properly, then the opposition would be opposing the consensus will of the people, and how could such a stance be legitimate? People do not see a need for political debates and brokered decisions. They simply do not believe debates and compromises are necessary, since we all want the same general things, since the best way to achieve those things will be readily apparent to those who study the problems in an unbiased way, and since the little details of policy are not that important anyway. To put it simply, the people yearn for the "end of politics" (Schedler 1997).

Political elites, on the other hand, tend to believe the ideal democracy is characterized by an excited commotion, with diverse ideas and new proposals being offered and tested in the stimulating crucible of public debate. Sides are picked, battles are fought, debates are held, and the resulting compromised outcome by definition reflects an appropriate synthesis of legitimate conflicting forces (see Dahl 1956). Crick (1992: 18) sees government as "the open canvassing of rival interests." If politicians sound too much alike (Brody and Page 1972) or if they focus their campaigns on their (and their opponents') families or personal traits such as integrity (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995), analysts see this as a failure of the process, a deviation from proper, issue-based politics. Remember, in Converse's well-known formulation (1964), citizens' political capabilities are judged by their ideological understanding, their issue constraint, and their issue consistency. Citizens lacking a coherent ideology (i.e., lacking a set of issue beliefs that hang together in some fashion) are judged to be deficient.

But the people do not see failure in the same place analysts see failure. People equate the presence of dissenting policy proposals with the presence of special interests and the attendant demotion of the true consensual, general interest. As a result, the people believe competition and differences should not be revered as the *sine qua non* of good government but instead should be reviled as its bane. People do not want to have to meet under Rousseau's oak tree to resolve political issues; they want someone else to meet. But they want the people who meet to be intimately in touch with the realities of the lives of ordinary people – realities they believe to be generally universal. If this is the case, disagreements among those who meet will be virtually nonexistent, and deciding what to do will be

quick and painless. Governing experts will implement decisions in the most efficient manner, and the public will not have to hear about delays, debates, compromises, gridlock, egos, and agendas.

To the extent the people *are* willing to be involved in politics, the motivation stems not from their desire to achieve a certain policy outcome but, rather, their desire to keep politicians from being able to get away with behaving in a self-serving fashion. This is an important difference. People are not sure what policies they want, but they know what processes they do *not* want – and those are processes in which people who are making political decisions are able to feather their own nests. People's political involvement, such as it is, is often driven by the perception that politicians and their special-interest ventriloquists are taking advantage of ordinary people (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2001).

The Supreme Court is relatively popular not just because the justices hide their internal conflict from public view but mostly because their decisions are not perceived to affect their own material well-being. When the Court permits criminals to get off on technicalities or radicals to burn the American flag, the public, by wide margins, believes the decisions to be seriously wrong-headed. But approval of the Court persists because the situation of the justices themselves has not been improved by those decisions or any others they make.

A perfect illustration of the benefits derived by the Court from public perception of the motivation of the justices surfaced in the aftermath of the 2000 presidential election. When the Court decided in a contentious 5-4 vote (with an unusually personal attack on fellow justices contained in John Paul Steven's dissent) to give the presidency to George W. Bush, most observers predicted the Court's standing, even legitimacy, would suffer. Jeffrey Rosen, for example, felt the Court had put itself "in harm's way" by revealing that it is "no less ideologically divided than every other institution" (2000: 17). Elites were therefore surprised when, though the people saw the Court as divided as a result of *Bush v. Gore*, the realization did nothing to lower public approval. As Richard Morin and Claudia Deane (2001) noted on the basis of *Washington Post* data, little damage was done to public confidence in the Supreme Court. All other surveys in early 2001 showed the same thing. Our theory provides a clear explanation for Court approval thriving despite *Bush v. Gore*. The public may not have liked what the Court did and many may have realized for the first time that the Court is ideological, even political. But most people were not led to conclude that the justices'

actions were designed to make themselves rich. Political conflict in and of itself is not despised by the people. Political conflict traceable to self-serving interests is.¹⁴

By way of contrast to the Court, when Congress votes on campaign finance, patients' bills of rights, congressional salaries, tax loopholes, tobacco subsidies, and pollution control, the public may or may not be upset with the particular outcome, but approval of Congress suffers regardless because the public is absolutely convinced that the decisions are attributable to the desire of the members to better themselves by securing reelection, by getting a trip to Maui, by getting rich, or by garnering a major contribution for their campaign coffers. The people are not always sure what decisions they want, but they are sure they want those decisions to be made for something other than self-serving reasons. Ironically, the more the public trusts elected officials to make unbiased decisions, the less the public participates in politics. The ideal form of government, in the opinion of many people, is one in which they can defer virtually all political decisions to government officials but at the same time trust those officials to be in touch with the American people and to act in the interest of those people and not themselves.

¹⁴This is a point missed by our earlier research (see Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995).