ELITE CUES AND POLITICAL DECISION MAKING

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INTRODUCTION

For most Americans, most political issues are complex and remote. Recognizing the prohibitive costs of becoming well informed on a wide range of issues, Anthony Downs (1957, p. 233) notes that the average citizen "cannot be expert in all the fields of policy that are relevant to his decision. Therefore, he will seek assistance from men who are experts in those fields, have the same political goals he does, and have good judgment."[1] As a resource-saving device, individuals will rely on trusted experts and political elites to form their opinions on political issues without having to work through the details of those issues themselves.

Citizens have clear incentives to take political cues from those more knowledgeable, typically experts or elites whose views are conveyed by the media. But while the incentives for elite cue taking are clear, the process and the implications are not. How do citizens make use of elite cues in their political decision making, and are elite cues effective in guiding citizens toward the political choices that a more "informationally demanding" process would produce?

Much is at stake in answering these questions. It is well established that the American public is woefully uninformed on political issues (Campbell et al., 1960; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996), and many fear that this widespread political ignorance threatens democratic processes. Yet despite their lack of information, Americans do express opinions on a wide range of political issues. Moreover,

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these opinions – in the aggregate at least – appear to respond in sensible and predictable ways to changes in social and political conditions (Page & Shapiro, 1992).

One mechanism that has been offered as a bridge between the public's general ignorance of relevant information and the "rational" behavior of its collective opinions is the use of informational shortcuts or heuristics. Heuristics enable people to "be knowledgeable in their reasoning about political choices without necessarily possessing a large body of knowledge about politics" (Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock 1991, p. 19). As suggested above by Downs, a common heuristic is the elite cue.

This article reviews the logic of elite cueing, the empirical evidence that bears on citizens' use of elite cues in political decision making, and the consequences of "cue taking" for American democracy. We understand elites to include a potentially wide range of individuals and organizations, including politicians and political officials, policy experts, interest groups, religious leaders, and journalists. Personal acquaintances can also serve as cue-givers to the extent that the decision maker sees them as being more knowledgeable about a particular question than he or she is. Although the process of gaining exposure to the cues of personal cue-givers may differ from the process through which elite cues are acquired, we expect that the psychology of cue-based decision making is largely the same. In this paper, however, we concentrate on the more visible influence of elite cue-givers – that is, those whose views are communicated through the media.[2]

In the first section below we describe the psychology of cue taking, drawing from cognitive models of central and peripheral processing. The second section examines the characteristics that make political issues more or less attractive for cue taking and the characteristics that make individuals more or less likely to use cues in political decision making. In Section three, we turn our attention to citizens' selection of cue givers, exploring the criteria by which potential cue-giving elites are judged. Section four asks how effective cue-based decision making is in enabling relatively uninformed citizens to make the same political judgments that they would make if fully knowledgeable about the topic at hand. The final section addresses the implications of elite cue taking for American democracy, examining the conditions necessary for effective cue taking and the characteristics of the existing cue-giving environment.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF CUE TAKING: CENTRAL VERSUS PERIPHERAL PROCESSING

In their Elaboration Likelihood Model, Richard Petty and John Cacioppo (1981, 1986) develop an account of persuasion with particular usefulness for

understanding cue-based decision making. Petty and Cacioppo identify two paths to persuasion. The central route to persuasion entails consideration of substantive content, including evidence and the soundness of an argument's logic. The primary determinant of persuasion through central processing is argument strength; if attitude change occurs through this route it is expected to be relatively stable and enduring. The peripheral route, in contrast, entails consideration of factors external to message content, such as the credibility and attractiveness of the message source. The primary determinants of peripheral-route persuasion are "persuasion cues" which produce attitude change "*without any active thinking about the attributes of the issue or the object under consideration"* (Petty & Cacioppo, 1981, p. 256; italics in original). Attitude change through peripheral processes is more superficial and less stable than central-route persuasion (see Chaiken, 1980, 1987 for a description of her similar dual-process "heuristic-systematic model" of persuasion).

Petty and Cacioppo identify two factors that influence whether individuals use central rather than peripheral processing motivation and ability. Individuals with greater involvement or concern with an issue are more likely to be motivated to use central-route processing (which requires greater cognitive effort than cue-based peripheral processing). For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1986) asked college undergraduates to evaluate a proposal for new comprehensive examinations. They provided their subjects with either strong or weak arguments and attributed the arguments to either a high-status or low-status source. They found that students who expected to be affected by the proposed exams disregarded source credentials and based their evaluation of the exams on the strength of the arguments they were given. However, students who were told that proposed exams would not begin for ten years were uninfluenced by argument strength but responded instead to the credibility of the arguments' alleged source.

The greater cognitive demands of central-route processing means that not only motivation but also the ability to judge an argument on its merits will influence the way information is evaluated. When a topic is very complex or requires specialized knowledge, decision makers will be more likely to rely on peripheral cues such as source credibility. In addition to characteristics of issues and decision makers, the decision-making context can also influence a decision-maker's ability to evaluate the merits of an argument. For example, Petty and Cacioppo (1979) found that time pressures or distractions decreased subjects' information processing abilities and led to greater reliance on peripheral-route cues in decision making.

There are many possible peripheral-route heuristics that citizens might employ to simplify the process of political decision making. Contemporary discussions

of cognitive heuristics originate in Kahneman and Tversky's pioneering work (Kahneman & Tversky, 1972, 1973; Tversky & Kahneman, 1973, 1974). Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock (1991) apply these concepts to the study of mass politics, and expand the set of heuristic processes to include "availability" (drawn from Kahneman & Tversky), "likability," and "desert." Mondak (1994b) provides a valuable discussion of heuristic-based political decision making, adding the "representativeness" heuristic to the list above.

We believe that all of these (and no doubt many other) heuristics play a role in shaping citizens' views of political issues. Among political scientists, however, the heuristic that has attracted the greatest attention is the use of elite cues as aids in political decision making. In this paper we examine only elite cueing as a decision-making shortcut.

Motivation and Opinion Formation

An overarching assumption in the literature on dual-process decision making and political cue taking is that a decision-maker's primary motivation is to "get it right," in the sense of arriving at a decision that is most consistent with her values and interests. But other decision-making motivations may come into play. For example, quite independent of the merits of the case, a decision maker might prefer that his position on an issue be consistent with his spouse's position. Moreover, political preferences are rarely acquired in one dramatic moment, but are more often formed over time as an individual's pool of relevant information accumulates. Research on "motivated reasoning" shows that people have a strong tendency to evaluate new information in a manner biased toward maintaining their pre-existing preferences (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Lodge, McGraw & Stroh, 1989; Lodge, Steenbergen & Brau, 1995). In short, the desire to "get it right" is only one of the motivations at work in political decision making.

Given that individual decision making can be guided by multiple motivations, cue taking can not only help a decision maker in forming a preference on an issue, but can also serve to defend or justify an already existing preference. In this case, an existing preference for one or another position on an issue might guide a decision in his or her choice of cue-givers.

The discussion of cue taking offered below assumes that the decision-maker's primary motivation is to identify the position most consistent with his or her values and interests. This focus reflects the dominant orientation of this literature and responds to the question "Do elite cues enable citizens to arrive at the same preferences that a more demanding, substantively focused decision process would produce?" It is important to keep in mind, however, that other decision-making

motives also exist, and that the dynamics of elite cue taking (like the dynamics of substantive deliberation) will differ depending on the mix of motivations at work.

WHEN ARE CUES USED?

Based on dual process models of persuasion we would predict that citizens are more likely to rely on elite cues in forming opinions on new or technically complex issues (reflecting a lesser ability to reason through the substance of the issue), or on issues with low levels of involvement or concern (reflecting lower motivation to do so). Similarly, we expect to find greater reliance on elite cues among citizens with lower levels of political knowledge and interest (reflecting lower levels of ability and motivation, respectively). In this section we review the empirical literature on citizen use of elite cues with an eye toward these predictions.

What Issues are Most Likely to be "Cueable"?

Cues and shortcuts are available on every political issue and cue-taking incentives are high. For most Americans, politics is a sideshow in the circus of life. Most political issues seem complex and remote, so following politics generally becomes a hobby that competes for time with the more tangible demands of work and family. In this context, why would a person opt to forego a cue in lieu of substantive information and arguments? Are there particular issues that make a person more likely to invest the time and cognitive resources necessary for central-route processing?

Hard versus Easy Issues

Carmines and Stimson (1980) provide a useful distinction between easy issues, which are ends-oriented, emotional, and relatively familiar, and hard issues, which are means-oriented, technical, and unfamiliar. A law against flag burning, for example, is an easy issue – not because the "correct" position seems obvious but because it involves values and ideas that are familiar and accessible to most people. Hard issues, on the other hand, typically require specialized knowledge that might range from environmental science (on issues like acid rain or environmental carcinogens) to social or economic dynamics (e.g. the impact of immigration on the U.S. economy) to foreign affairs (e.g. the strategic importance of Middle Eastern allies). Some issues are clearly "easier" or "harder" than others in a general sense. But the diversity of specialized knowledge across individuals suggests that different issues are likely to be more or less difficult for different people.[3]

Empirical findings generally support the prediction that citizens will look to source cues more when evaluating hard issues. Ratneshwar and Chaiken (1991) found that when study participants have difficulty comprehending a message, they are more likely to use source credibility to infer level of agreement with the message. Conversely, high comprehensibility leads participants to overlook source credibility. For example, Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) found that cues from trusted legislators increased respondents' certainty more for the hard issue of a new missile defense system than for the easy issue of compensation for racial discrimination. Lupia (1994) showed that voters who were poorly informed about the complex details of five competing insurance-reform initiatives on a California ballot used elite cues (in this case, the endorsement or opposition of the insurance industry). On this "hard" issue, poorly informed voters who had elite cues to draw on were able to emulate the voting behavior of their better-informed peers. Finally, in the absence of source cues, Cobb and Kuklinski (1997) report that hard arguments about national health care generally have less influence than easy arguments.

Perhaps the clearest cases of "easy" issues are those in which the empirical components are simple and undisputed and citizens' evaluations of the issues turn primarily on their value commitments. In such cases, the public may feel little need for the assistance of elite cues in coming to judgment. The 1993 confirmation hearing of Zoe Baird, nominated by President Clinton for U.S. Attorney General, provides a good example.

When news broke that Baird had employed two Peruvians living illegally in the United States, the near-consensus among political leaders and media commentators was that this posed no threat to Baird's confirmation. By contrast, the mass public condemned Baird, phoning in words of protest to members of Congress and to radio talk shows. Page and Tannenbaum (1996) found that the public's "mass condemnation" of Baird preceded the appearance of anti-Baird sentiment in the mainstream media, and survey data showed that public rejection was large and not confined to any particular demographic group (Page & Tannenbaum, 1996). In evaluating Baird's behavior and her fitness for the office of Attorney General, the public apparently had little need for elite cues.

The public's response to revelations of President Clinton's affair with a 23-year-old White House intern similarly shows that the public will ignore elite cues on some issues. In this case, the near-unanimous elite opinion that the Lewinsky affair meant big trouble for Clinton and the widespread calls for his resignation in the opinion pages of the nation's newspapers seemed to have little effect on public opinion (Zaller, 1998; Kagay, 1999). While the evidence is still thin, it appears that citizens behave in the political realm much as they do in the psychology lab. At least at the extremes, the public relies more on elite cues in evaluating technical and unfamiliar issues.

High-Involvement versus Low-Involvement Issues. Experiments in social psychology generally confirm that high personal involvement in an issue makes participants less likely to rely on source cues and more likely to consider argument strength (Hample, 1985; Morley, 1987; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986). In the political world, however, personal involvement in an issue rarely matches the level found in these experiments (Zaller, 1992, p. 46). While the stakes in political decision making are potentially high, the connections between any specific policy choice and the life conditions of any given citizen are typically nebulous and opaque (Edelman, 1985). Even policy proposals on such "doorstep" issues as health care, taxes, and family leave have multiple, tenuous links from policy options to suspected effects on everyday life.

While the characteristics of an issue can make it "easy" or "hard," involvement necessarily reflects the relationship *between* a particular issue and an individual decision maker.[4] Although we are not aware of any research that explicitly compares citizens' political decision making with regard to high-involvement versus low-involvement *issues*, there is some evidence that central-route processing is more prevalent among those *individuals* who are more involved with a specific issue. For example, van Knippenberg and Daamen (1996) presented survey respondents with an array of factual information about alternative ways of generating electricity. They found that both higher educated respondents and those who expressed greater involvement with energy policy expressed more stable and consistent policy preferences. The authors interpreted these results as reflecting the greater use of central-route processing among respondents with higher levels of ability (as measured by education) and motivation (as measured by issue involvement).

Van Knippenberg and Daamen's study suggests that at least a subset of citizens will reason through the specifics of a complex public policy issue if asked to do so. But the respondents in this study were given only raw information about alternative energy proposals, and therefore did not have the option of using elite cues as a shortcut in their decision making. How these results correspond to the real-world context of political decision making remains unclear.[5]

Even at extreme levels of political involvement – for example, on issues where an individual's livelihood is clearly and directly at stake – people may be more likely to use cues than to reason through the substance of a complex issue. For example, doctors evaluating health care reform are less likely to wade into the literature on health care financing than to turn to their professional organizations for cues about what reforms to support or oppose. Thus even for high-involvement issues, and all the more so for issues of lesser concern, cue taking is likely to be a more common means of evaluating political issues than substantive assessment of competing evidence and arguments.

Who is Most Responsive to Elite Cues?

Converse (1962) suggested that political persuasion depends on the two separate processes of exposure to a political message and acceptance of its contents. McGuire (1968), focusing not on political communication but on the personality correlates of susceptibility to persuasion, developed a similar model in which the probability of opinion change is a function of the probability of receiving a message times the probability of yielding to the message if it is received. For McGuire, message "reception" meant more than exposure however; a potentially persuasive message was considered to be received only if it was both *attended to* and *comprehended by* a decision maker.

McGuire (1969) used this model to account for the variety of different functional relationships between individual characteristics and the probability of opinion change in response to a persuasive message. McGuire noted, for example, that self-esteem is curvilinearly related to influenceability, with low- and high-esteem individuals exhibiting the smallest probability of opinion change, and average esteem individuals exhibiting the greatest probability of opinion change. The curvilinear form of this relationship, McGuire argued, results from the positive association of self-esteem with message reception (due to greater sociability) and the negative association of self-esteem to yielding (due to higher confidence). Thus individuals with low self-esteem are unlikely to receive the message in the first place, while those with high self-esteem will receive it but resist its persuasive influence.[6]

The flexibility of McGuire's two-stage model allows it to account not only for curvilinear relationships with opinion change, but for negative and positive relationships as well. For example, McGuire (1968) notes that lower intelligence scores are generally associated with higher levels of opinion change due to the greater tendency of those scoring lower on intelligence scales to yield to a persuasive message. But in circumstances where message reception is difficult (e.g. a message that is hard to comprehend), intelligence scores may be positively related to opinion change.

Applying the Converse-McGuire model of opinion change to the context of political cue taking, Zaller (1992) highlights the roles of political awareness (i.e. knowledge about and cognitive engagement with politics) and message congruity or incongruity with a decision-maker's pre-existing political orientations. Awareness, Zaller argues, is positively related to political message reception, but negatively related to acceptance of messages that are inconsistent with pre-existing political orientations. The combination of political awareness, political orientation, and message environment determine the likelihood of opinion change in response to elite cues. In a message environment in which

essentially all elites support the same position on an issue (e.g. the Vietnam war during the early 1960s), citizens' political awareness will be positively related to the mainstream position. In cases where elites disagree, on the other hand, the pattern of public opinion will depend on the nature of the dominant message flow at a given point in time.

For example, during the first two years of the Reagan presidency, elite messages regarding defense spending (as conveyed through the mass media) were predominantly opposed to further spending increases (Zaller, 1992, p. 128). As a result, the relationship between political awareness and preferences on defense spending differed for Democrats (whose political predispositions were consistent with elite messages) and Republicans (whose political predispositions were inconsistent with those messages). Among Democrats, greater political awareness led to a higher probability of receiving the anti-defense spending message, while resistance was low at all awareness levels. Consequently, awareness among Democrats was positively and monotonically associated with opinion change in opposition to defense spending.

Among Republicans, on the other hand, the relationship between political awareness and opinion change was curvilinear: Republicans with low levels of political awareness did not receive the elite cues about defense spending, while those with high levels of political awareness received but resisted them. For Republicans, the greatest responsiveness to elite cues occurred among those with moderate levels of political awareness.

Zaller's model of political opinion formation focuses exclusively on the psychologically "peripheral" process of cue taking. Other researchers have sought to compare the use of cue-driven and information-driven decision processes for citizens with varying levels of education or political information. Their findings are not inconsistent with Zaller's work, but they suggest that while the politically engaged may be most capable of effective cue taking, they may also be – at least under some circumstances – the least dependent on source cues and the most likely to make use of more demanding central-process decision-making strategies.

In a study of public preferences on a California anti-nuclear energy initiative, Kuklinski, Metlay and Kay (1982) found that well-informed and poorly-informed respondents made similar use of cues from groups like labor unions, environmentalists, business leaders, utilities, and so on.[7] However, the preferences of the better informed were more strongly influenced by their assessments of the specific costs and benefits of nuclear energy and by their ideological orientations. Thus better informed citizens *responded to* elite cues like those with less information, but because they made use of a wider range of information, the better informed *depended less* on elite cues in forming their preferences.

Using a very different approach, Mondak (1994a) compared responses to three questions about the Reagan administration's defense build-up in the early 1980s. The "control" version stated that "The federal government has undertaken a major build-up of our military defense during the past several years." Respondents were then asked "Do you feel this military build-up has been necessary or unnecessary?" In the "cueing" condition, an identical question was asked except that in place of the federal government, the military build-up was attributed to "The Reagan administration." Finally, a "policy information" version of the question contained both the cue to the Reagan administration and the additional information that the defense build-up involved $2.4 trillion, "more money than has been spent in any comparable period since World War II."

The close and obvious connection between the defense policy of the "federal government" and that of the "Reagan administration," might lead us to expect the Reagan cue to have its largest impact on the least politically aware. This is indeed what Mondak found. The only group that responded differently to the cueing and control versions consisted of Reagan opponents who had low levels of education. For this group, replacing the reference to the "federal government" with the "Reagan administration" led about one-quarter of those who would otherwise be expected to support the defense build-up to oppose it instead.[8]

Mondak found cueing alone to have its largest impact among the least educated respondents. In contrast, policy information most strongly influenced the preferences of the best-educated respondents, at least among those who generally disapproved of Reagan's performance as president. Adding policy information to the question on the defense build-up reduced by half the number of well-educated Reagan opponents who supported the build-up, but among poorly educated Reagan opponents, the addition of policy information made virtually no difference.

Existing research suggests that there is no simple and universal relationship between political sophistication and the use of elite cues. When cue-taking depends on both attentiveness to information and responsiveness to that information (as in observational studies such as Zaller, 1992), cue taking appears to be most common among the most politically sophisticated. In experimental studies, however, in which cues are (or are not) provided to respondents, cue taking has been found to be equally important to more and less sophisticated respondents (Kuklinski, Metlay & Kay, 1982), or to be more important to the least sophisticated (Mondak, 1994a). These latter studies in particular suggest that differences in the use of elite source cues across education or political information may well depend on the complexity of the issue and the informational value of the cue. Simple cues, like the association between the incumbent president and federal policy, may have their largest impact on the least

politically involved both because they are easy to understand and because they contain information (or remind cue takers of connections) that better informed citizens are already aware of.[9] In contrast, well-educated respondents' use of source cues on nuclear power may reflect both the complexity of the issue and the information contained in the cues. These two studies were consistent, however, in finding that policy-relevant information had the strongest influence on the policy preferences of those with the highest levels of education or political information.

Studies of individual differences in political cue taking have focused solely on political knowledge or engagement. This research has yet to offer a definitive account of the conditions under which citizens with different levels of political knowledge will be more or less likely to use elite source cues in forming preferences on political issues. But it does offer insight into the multiple factors that affect the relationship between political knowledge and cue taking. Among the important factors in this relationship are the partisan flow of cueing information (that is, whether elite cues exclusively favor one side of an issue or are politically divided), the accessibility of elite cues, the complexity of the issue, and the level of information contained in a given set of source cues.

FROM WHOM ARE CUES TAKEN?

By what criteria do citizens choose the elites from whom to take cues? Downs suggests two criteria: knowledge and "like-mindedness." As noted above, Downs indicates that the average citizen "will seek assistance from men who are experts in [their] fields, have the same political goals he does, and have good judgment" (1957, p. 223). Clearly, if a potential cue giver is thought to lack knowledge of the relevant issue or to have poor judgment in the relevant domain, citizens are unlikely to follow his or her advice. The role of shared political goals, however, is more complex.

Cue Taking from Like Minded and Non-like Minded Elites

Some students of elite cueing share Downs' view that cue takers respond to persuasive messages from those they deem like minded and disregard messages from those they believe to have differing goals, values, or interests with regard to the issue at hand. For example, Page and Shapiro write that "Ordinary citizens . . . can learn enough to form intelligent preferences simply by knowing whom to trust for a reliable conclusion. If the public lacks like-minded and trustworthy cue givers . . . collective deliberation breaks down" (1992, p. 365).

This conceptualization of "cue choosing" focuses on the characteristics of a message source that make the message persuasive to a given recipient. Typically, these characteristics are viewed as some form of perceived similarity of interests or values between the message source and the message receiver. Effective cue givers are often taken to be political elites that share the same ideological or partisan orientation as the member of the public. Thus, liberals will find a message from liberal leaders more persuasive than the same message coming from conservative leaders. Similarly, conservatives are more likely to follow the lead of conservative elites.

In Zaller's model, citizens with low levels of political awareness are fairly undiscriminating about who they will take cues from. But as political awareness grows, the tendency to dismiss cues from non-like-minded elites increases. Describing what he labels "partisan resistance" to elite cues, Zaller argues that "Democrats and Republicans tend to reject messages from the opposing party, and liberals and conservatives reject persuasive communications that are inconsistent with their ideologies" (1992, p. 267).

This conceptualization of elite cues is the least demanding on the public. All it requires is that citizens attend to the elite source of a potentially persuasive message and accept the message only if the source is deemed "like minded." But what happens if the source of the message is not "like minded"? This first conceptualization of cue taking suggests that in such cases the message is rejected and the receiver's policy preferences remain unchanged.

A second model of elite cueing suggests a slightly more complex process. From this perspective, elite messages can have not only persuasive effects, but dissuasive effects as well. A Republican identifier might respond to a message from Democratic elites not by rejecting the Democratic endorsement, but by adopting the opposite position. For example, the endorsement by Democratic leaders of a particular campaign finance reform bill might lead Democratic identifiers to increase their support for the bill, but might also lead Republican identifiers to decrease their support (or increase their opposition). In the first model, source cues serve as a perceptual screen, allowing some persuasive messages to "penetrate" and keeping others at bay. In the second model, message recipients are somewhat more sophisticated in their use of cueing information, adapting potentially persuasive messages to their own purposes on the basis of source cues.

Carmines and Kuklinski (1990) adopt this second version of elite cueing in their discussion of legislators as elite source cues. They suggest that citizens' policy preferences can be shaped by cues from both like-minded and non-like minded elites:

> In the simple (and perhaps common) case where trusted congressional members take one side of the policy debate and untrusted legislators the other, the institutionally generated

> information is reinforcing and gives citizens a firm basis on which to form an opinion (p. 254).

Formal models of cue taking from sources with varying degrees of like mindedness are developed by Calvert (1985, 1986), McKelvey and Ordeshook (1985, 1986), and Grofman and Norrander (1990). Although differing in focus and intent, these models identify a range of theoretical conditions under which cue taking can effectively substitute for substantive knowledge about political candidates or issues.

In an empirical demonstration of this process, Lupia (1995) told random subsamples of respondents that Jesse Jackson either favored or opposed no-fault automobile insurance, while other random subsamples were told that Patrick Buchanan either favored or opposed such insurance. As this second model of elite cue taking would suggest, Lupia found that Democratic respondents who heard that Buchanan favored no-fault insurance were less likely to favor it themselves compared to those who heard that Buchanan opposed it. Buchanan's endorsement apparently provided "dissuasive" information to Democratic respondents. In Lupia's experiment, the same pattern held for Republican respondents, who took Jackson's endorsement as a reason to oppose no-fault insurance. Interestingly, in both cases the message from an elite member of the opposite party actually had a larger influence on respondents' policy preferences than the message from an elite member of the respondent's own party. That is, Democrats were more influenced by Buchanan's purported position on no-fault insurance than by Jackson's, while Republicans were more influenced by Jackson's position than by Buchanan's (Lupia, 1995, p. 14).

A similar dissuasive influence of elite cues was also found in Mondak's (1994a) study of attitudes toward the Reagan defense build-up discussed above. Consistent with Lupia's findings, Mondak found that the effect of the "Reagan administration" cue (in comparison to "the federal government") was greater for Reagan opponents than it was for Reagan supporters (Mondak 1994a, p. 177; see also Mondak, 1993).

Truthfulness and Cue Taking

Lupia and McCubbins (1998) discuss elite cues within the broader context of political persuasion. They argue that the necessary and sufficient conditions for persuasion are: (1) that a speaker is knowledgeable about the issue at hand, and (2) that the speaker can be trusted to truthfully reveal what he or she knows. The perception of trustworthiness, Lupia and McCubbins point out, can result either from perceived common interests between the speaker and the cue taker, or from external circumstances such as penalties for lying. Based on their

analysis of the conditions of persuasion, Lupia and McCubbins argue that like-mindedness is not a necessary condition for persuasion. Indeed, they view it as irrelevant to persuasion except inasmuch as it sheds light on a speaker's knowledge or trustworthiness (1998, p. 64).

For decision making based on raw information, we might well be indifferent to the values or interests of a potential information source; whether like minded or non-like-minded in their political orientations, they are equally useful as long as they are knowledgeable and can be trusted to reveal what they know. As Lupia and McCubbins put it "You do not necessarily learn more from people who are like you, nor do you necessarily learn more from people you like" (1998, p. 63).

But what about decision making based on elite source cues rather than substantive information? In this case, the information needed is precisely the cue giver's political orientations and his or her policy endorsement. A Republican citizen, for example, might encounter opposing endorsements on a given policy from Democratic and Republican elites. The citizen might well believe both elite sources to be equally knowledgeable about the issue and both to have equally compelling incentives to speak truthfully. But the cue-taking citizen would respond very differently to the advice (or endorsement) of the two different sources.[10]

Faith in the truth of elites' messages is as important in cue taking as it is in information-based decision making. But the relevant messages for cue takers are the predispositions (i.e. the values and interests) of a cue giver and his or her policy endorsement. It is unusual for cue givers to purposefully misrepresent their true policy preferences, but perhaps not so unusual for cue givers to misrepresent their true values and interests. For example, many elites who endorse income tax cuts claim to have the interests of the middle class at heart. While this is likely true for some of these potential cue givers, others who endorse tax cuts may do so out of concern not for the middle class but for the wealthy. By misrepresenting their underlying political orientation, such duplicitous elites try to entice cue takers to adopt their policy preferences out of the mistaken belief that they share a set of political values.[11]

For effective cue taking to occur, a cue taker need not share the same political values and interests as a potential cue giver. But the cue taker does need true information about the cue giver's values and interests, as well as knowledge of the cue giver's policy preferences.

Cue Taking Decision Rules

Like other heuristics, elite cues can greatly simplify political preference formation. But the extent of this simplification varies depending on the cue-taking

decision rules an individual cue taker employs. The simplest form of elite cue taking consists of an unreflective acceptance of whatever elite communication one happens to encounter. Zaller attributes this style of cue taking to citizens with the lowest level of political awareness. Most citizens, however, appear to discriminate at least to some degree among potential elite cueing sources. At the extreme, we would expect few Americans to adopt the policy endorsements of Saddam Hussein or the American Communist Party.[12] How, then, do citizens decide from whom to take cues?

As discussed above, one consideration is whether the potential cue giver is like-minded or non-like-minded, with the most general and oft-noted criteria for judging like-mindedness being partisanship and ideology. One reason that the relationship between cue taker and cue giver in partisan or ideological orientation serves as a useful criterion is because it is relatively easy to assess. That is to say, information identifying elites' partisan affiliation and (to a lesser degree) ideological orientation is comparatively easy to come by. Political actors appearing in the media are almost invariably identified by a partisan label, and many potential cue-giving groups are classified by reporters as "liberal" or "conservative."

Cueing sources identified by their partisan and ideological orientations are also useful because they provide guidance across a multiplicity of issues. Simply by attending to the cues of Democratic or Republican leaders, a citizen can form opinions on the wide range of "party cleavage" issues – that is, those issues on which the two major parties take opposing stances (Page, 1978).

But partisan and ideologically-based cueing has its limitations. For one thing, issues sometimes arise that cross cut traditional cleavages. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), for example, was a contentious issue that had both supporters and opponents among leaders of both political parties. Moreover, the fit between the political orientations of any given cue taker and such broad groups as Democrats or Republicans, liberals or conservatives, is bound to be imperfect. This suggests a second and somewhat more complex decision rule for cue taking. For some citizens, the decision of who to take cues from may depend on the specific issue at hand. For example, some individuals may find that they share the Democrats' orientations on social issues and the Republicans' values on fiscal issues. In this case, effective cue taking would require a more complex calculus that divides up the world of elite cueing sources by issue type.

Following this same logic, a third model of elite cueing suggests not a few broad cue givers, but a multiplicity of elite cueing sources each identified with specific issues. For example, Lupia (1994) showed that the insurance industry served as a (negative) cue giver on the topic of automobile insurance reform in California. But we would not expect the public to turn toward the insurance industry for cues on welfare, or foreign policy, or racial set-asides. A host of

other groups likely serve as cue givers within particular policy domains: the Sierra Club on the environment, the AARP for retirement issues, unions and business groups on labor and trade policy, and so on.

By turning to alternative sources for cues in specific policy areas, citizens can better match their political values and interests with those of the cue givers they rely on. But such specialization in cue taking comes at a cost. Although certainly easier than evaluating the substance of every new issue, the amount of information needed to identify the appropriate cue givers for any given issue domain, and then to ascertain their position on new issues, is considerable. Consequently, we would expect the habitual use of multiple cue givers to be more common among more politically engaged citizens.

A final complication in the process of matching a cueing source with a set of issues is that a cue-takers' use of a particular cue may depend not only on the connection between the source and the issue, but on the three-way fit between the source, the issue, and the source's endorsement of a specific policy. One example of this three-way process is the "Nixon-to-China" phenomenon (Cukierman & Tommasi, 1998). Because President Nixon was widely viewed as a fervent anti-communist, his endorsement of normalizing relations with communist China was highly effective. Many citizens no doubt felt that their own orientations were less anti-communist than Nixon's. Consequently, they would not have been swayed by an *anti*-communist cue from the President. But for that same reason, Nixon's endorsement of normalization served as a strong signal that conditions in fact warranted a softer stand toward China. Thus, who a decision maker takes cues from may depend not only on the issue under consideration but on the relationship between the potential cue giver's endorsement and his or her perceived political orientations.

Thus far we have discussed cue taking as if the decision-maker's objective were to identify *the* cue-giver appropriate to a particular issue. In fact, citizens may often draw upon more than one cue giver in forming an opinion on a particular policy choice. In some cases multiple cue givers may be consistent and reinforcing in their endorsements, either because all like-minded cue givers express the same opinion, or because like-minded and non-like-minded cue givers express opposite opinions. In other cases, elite cues from broadly like-minded cue givers may be contradictory. If so, cue takers can either: (1) weigh the various cues and arrive at some intermediate opinion, (2) seek further information about the political values and interests of the cue givers which might explain the discrepancies in their endorsements, or (3) throw up their hands and fail to form any clear opinion on the issue.

Finally, we note that decision rules for identifying cue givers vary not only in the number of cue givers any individual turns toward on a single issue or across

many different issues, but also the kind of criteria by which cue givers are selected. Kuklinski and Hurley (1994), for example, contrast race and ideology as characteristics of potential cue givers that might be used by a cue taker to judge similarity of political values or orientation. In responding to policy cues on a racial issue from Jesse Jackson, Clarence Thomas, Ted Kennedy, and George Bush, Kuklinski and Hurley found that black subjects relied more on the race than the ideological orientation of the cue giver (responding more positively to cues from Jackson and Thomas than from Kennedy or Bush).

The decision process for choosing cue givers is itself a potentially demanding exercise. Consequently, it is not surprising that a second level of heuristic reasoning is often used. That is, rather than assessing the appropriateness of (say) a specific Democratic member of Congress to serve as a cue giver, a citizen might use the heuristic decision rule that Democrats in Congress generally share (or don't share) his or her political values. Similarly, characteristics such as race and sex can serve as fairly crude (but perhaps reasonably effective) *cues* about a potential cue-giver's political orientations.

HOW EFFECTIVE IS CUE-BASED POLITICAL DECISION MAKING?

Some see informational shortcuts like elite cues as an escape from the democratic dilemma of mass decision-making power combined with mass ignorance. Using decision-making heuristics, individuals who have little incentive to educate themselves about an array of complicated issues can nevertheless contribute meaningfully to democratic governance (Sniderman, Brody & Tetlock, 1991; Page & Shapiro, 1992; Popkin, 1991). Others fear that citizens who use such shortcuts are likely to end up at very different destinations than they would if fully knowledgeable about issues (Kuklinski & Quirk, 1998; Bartels, 1996; Althaus, 1998; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

Effective cue-based decision making requires first that citizens are able to distinguish between potential cue givers who share their political orientations and those who do not, and second that citizens are able to identify cue givers' policy endorsements. The research reviewed above provides some evidence on each of these points, but a firm conclusion is premature.

Discerning Cue Givers' Political Predispositions

Studies described above show that members of the public do indeed distinguish between like-minded and non-like-minded cue givers (Lupia, 1994, 1995; Kuklinski & Hurley, 1994; Kuklinski, Metlay & Kay, 1982). Further, while these distinctions are more common among citizens who are more politically

knowledgeable (Zaller, 1992), even poorly informed Americans distinguish among cue givers under the right circumstances (Mondak, 1994a; Kuklinski, Metlay & Kay, 1982). Finally, citizens at all levels of political engagement sometimes reject not specific cue givers but specific cues on particular issues, as in the Monica Lewinsky and Zoe Baird examples discussed above.

It is clear that the American public is attentive to the different political orientations of alternative cue givers, although the degree of this attentiveness appears to vary considerably both among individuals and across cueing sources. Further, even the endorsements of "trusted" cue givers will sometimes be rejected if they are obviously at variance with the public's evaluation of the issue at hand. Further research is needed to clarify the extent and circumstances under which citizens succeed in matching their political predispositions to the elites from whom they take political cues.

Identifying Cue Givers' Endorsements

Even if citizens do distinguish sufficiently between like-minded and non-like-minded cue givers, they must also correctly identify the policies that those cue givers endorse. Kuklinski, Metlay and Kay (1982, p. 628) found that the most well informed 20% of their sample was almost perfect in identifying the policy endorsements of six elite groups relevant to the nuclear energy initiative they studied. The bottom 80% of their respondents did not perform as well in this regard, but even so were able to correctly identify the endorsements of these groups about three-quarters of the time. Lupia's (1994, p. 73) insurance initiative voters did not do as well. Averaging across the five insurance reform measures, voters were correct in identifying the insurance industry's position only 57% of the time (a slim improvement over random guessing).

How does the public fare in the perhaps more common task of identifying the policy positions of prominent political figures or of the Democratic and Republican parties? A direct answer to this question is elusive because the views of specific elites cannot easily be mapped onto a survey question (Conover & Feldman, 1989; Krosnick, 1990, p 1978). It is not obvious, for example, what the "true" position of the Democratic party is on the standard NES 7-point scale for government services and spending.

A less demanding criterion of "correct perception" is available, however. At a minimum, effective cueing requires the ability to place different political figures or parties relative to each other on a given issue dimension. Even if the exact position of the Democratic party on government services is unclear, for example, it *is* clear that the Democrats are more supportive of government services and spending than are the Republicans.

Using this less demanding "relative placement" approach, Krosnick (1990) examined Americans' perceptions of the two 1984 presidential candidates' positions on: (1) whether government should provide more services and increase spending or fewer services and decrease spending, (2) whether government should see that everyone has a job and a good standard of living or just let each person get ahead on their own, and (3) whether government should become more or less involved in Central America. He found that between 18% and 31% of respondents failed to identify Reagan as more conservative than Mondale on these three issues (1990, p. 168). However, if we include in the calculations respondents who said they didn't know where to place one or the other candidate, the percentage failing to identifying Reagan as more conservative increases to between 31% and 42% (American National Election Study, 1984).

As a general rule, political parties are more enduring source cues than individuals, a feature that might facilitate perceptions of issue stances. On the other hand, parties are more heterogeneous and therefore more difficult to associate with a particular policy position. As these countervailing factors suggest, Americans in 1984 were about equally able (or unable) to identify the relative positions of the Democratic and Republican parties as they were the two presidential candidates: between 32% and 47% failed to identiy the Republican Party as the more conservative on these three issues (with respondents saying "Don't Know" for one or the other party included in the analysis; American National Election Study, 1984). In interpreting these results, it is worth considering that some respondents arrived at the correct placement of the two candidates or parties by guessing, and that respondents who declined to place themselves on these scales were not even asked to place the candidates or parties.

In sum, it appears that substantial proportions of the public are unable to identify the relative positions of the most visible political cue givers on some very central issues. Despite this unimpressive performance, cue taking from parties and candidates might be a very important part of preference formation for that segment of the public that is able to identify the policy positions of political elites. Further, existence of "issue publics" among the citizenry suggests that even those who are unable to identify the policy positions of potential cue givers on most issues may be able to do so for the few issues about which they care most (Converse, 1964; Iyengar, 1990; Krosnick, 1990).

Global Evaluations of Heuristic Decision Making

The effectiveness of elite cueing has been addressed from another angle as well. If the public is successful in using elite cues *and other informational shortcuts*

then we should find that the political judgments of poorly informed citizens resemble those of the well informed who share their political orientations.

In evaluating the overall effectiveness of political heuristics, we need to distinguish between two criteria of success. Heuristics can be judged both by their efficacy for individuals and by their effectiveness for a collectivity (Page & Shapiro, 1992). If shortcuts lead some citizens to support a policy which, if they spent the time to study it, they would oppose, then heuristic reasoning has failed those citizens. But if relying on shortcuts leads some "true opponents" to support a policy and also leads an equal number of "true supporters" to oppose that policy, then aggregate opinion on that issue would not differ from what would be found if everyone based their position on a thorough substantive investigation.

We focus here on the effectiveness of heuristics for collective (i.e. aggregate) opinion formation, both because we have more evidence on this score and because it is of greater importance for democratic governance. Despite the limited power of individual citizens, the public as a whole does appear to have substantial influence over government policy (Monroe, 1979; Monroe & Gardner, 1987; Page & Shapiro, 1983; Stimson, MacKuen & Erikson, 1995). If heuristics lead to aggregate preferences that are strongly at variance with what an informed public would desire, then democracy is at risk.

A growing literature attempts to make global evaluations of the effectiveness of the public's political decision-making processes, asking how closely citizens come to the choices they would make if fully informed about the issues or vote choices at hand. The most straightforward way to address this question is to inform a representative sample of the public about a set of issues and see whether their preferences change as a result. If citizens are already using heuristics effectively, their issue positions should not change much as a result of the new information.

James Fishkin has done just this in a series of "deliberative polls" conducted both in the United States and abroad. For example, the National Issues Convention (NIC), conducted in January of 1996, brought 466 participants, selected at random from the U.S. population, to Austin, Texas (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Luskin & Fishkin, 1998). Participants spent four days reading briefing materials on various economic, foreign policy, and family issues, discussing those issues in small groups, and participating in question-and-answer sessions with experts. When initially contacted, and once again at the end of their stay in Austin, NIC participants answered identical questions concerning their policy preferences in these three issue areas. To provide a comparison group, members of the initial sample who elected not to come to Austin completed the same surveys. Like the Austin participants, the control group

answered identical questions twice (when initially contacted and once again when the Austin group completed their second questionnaire).

On many of the issues examined, substantial numbers of participants changed their preferences during the course of the study. For example, when initially surveyed, 44% of participants expressed support for a flat tax but after four days of deliberation, only 30% still thought the flat tax was a good idea (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999, p. 25). On other items, however, changes were minimal. Further, if non-participants' attitudes changed as much as participants' then we should attribute those changes to random fluctuations in response tendencies or to the experience of being interviewed twice rather than to the influence of information or deliberation on the substance of the issues.

Rescaling the 48 policy questions to the same 0-to-1 scale reveals that the aggregate preferences of NIC participants did change more than non-participants, but not by much. Across all 48 items, the absolute change in aggregate score for participants averaged 0.05 units, while the aggregate change for non-participants averaged 0.03 units.[13]

Although it appears that the average aggregate change in response to the education and deliberation of the National Issues Convention was small, a firm conclusion about the efficacy of existing heuristics in allowing citizens to identify the positions they would take if better informed is elusive. Perhaps some *other* information than that provided would have led the participants to change their minds. Or, to put the matter another way, perhaps not all of the 48 policy questions were sufficiently relevant to the information provided. In this case, we would not expect to see changes on all of the policy questions examined, and the changes that did take place would be diluted by the stability of responses to the less relevant items.

Another approach to the global evaluation of heuristic decision making statistically simulates "fully informed preferences" by comparing the preferences of the highly informed to those of less informed respondents with the same demographic characteristics (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Bartels, 1996; Althaus, 1998). For example, examining presidential vote choice for 1972 through 1992, Bartels (1996) found that the aggregate vote share for Democratic candidates would have been about two percentage points lower if the entire electorate was as well informed as his best informed respondents. Incumbent presidents running for re-election appear to be even more advantaged by the public's lack of information; Bartels estimated that the vote share for incumbent presidents would have been almost five percentage points lower in a fully informed electorate.

Althaus (1998) used a similar approach to model policy preferences. He found that the aggregate issue preferences of a fully informed citizenry would be more

dovish on foreign policy, more willing to pay for government services, less willing to pay for defense, more supportive of the free market, slightly more progressive on most social issues, and slightly less progressive on some racial issues. Across the 45 policy preference questions he examines, Althaus found an average difference of about seven percentage points between actual and hypothetical fully informed opinion.[14]

How Successful is Heuristic-Based Decision Making?

The research discussed above allows us to begin to evaluate the public's success in compensating for its lack of political information. But we must be clear about what any such evaluation can and cannot reveal. First, the studies by Fishkin, Bartels, and Althaus are silent about what heuristic decision-making processes (if any) the public employs. These studies simply ask how better informed preferences might differ from those currently expressed. Small differences could reflect the extensive use of shortcuts by the American public, but we have no way of judging what those specific shortcuts are.

A second consideration in assessing the findings reported above is that they reflect not the *potential* of heuristics to substitute for in-depth information, but only the extent to which the public does *in fact* make effective use of heuristics. Large differences between "actual" and "informed" opinions could reflect either the failure of heuristics or their lack of use by the public. Either is important, to be sure, but they lead to very different conclusions about the efficacy of informational shortcuts and the implications for democratic governance. Lupia's (1994) study of insurance reform provides a case in point. Although knowledge of the insurance industry's policy endorsements was spotty at best, those poorly informed voters who *did* correctly perceive these cues were able to emulate the voting behavior of voters with substantive knowledge of the competing insurance initiatives.

Furthermore, as we discuss below, either the failure of heuristics to lead decision makers to the "right" conclusions or the lack of use of heuristics by the public could result from one (or both) of two conditions. First, an indifference to political issues or lack of effort among the public could explain citizens' failures to make use of available cues. On the other hand, a lack of available cues from appropriate elites could also explain both the failure to use cueing information and the poor outcome that would result if citizens substituted more easily available but less appropriate cueing sources. In short, ineffective citizen decision making suggests shortcomings in the use of political heuristics, but does not reveal the extent to which those short-comings should be attributed to decision makers or to the decision-making environment.

With these limitations in mind, we can draw some tentative conclusions about the effectiveness of compensatory strategies of political decision making. In broad terms, the National Issues Convention (Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Luskin & Fishkin, 1998) demonstrated only modest changes in participants' policy preferences. Bartels' analysis of presidential vote choice found a very modest difference in party preference (of about two percentage points) and a more substantial (five percentage point) advantage for incumbent presidents due to the failures of heuristic decision processes. But as Althaus (1998:552) points out, none of the outcomes of the six elections that Bartels examined would have changed had the electorate voted in accord with Bartels' "fully informed" predictions. Finally, Althaus' (1998) analysis of policy preferences reveals the largest discrepancies between observed and "fully informed" opinions. On nine of the 45 policy questions Althaus look at, the public's predicted fully informed preference order (i.e. favor, oppose, or evenly-split) differed from the public's existing preference order.

Finally, any assessment of the efficacy of elite cues must acknowledge the unavoidable necessity of cue taking in a democratic system that involves innumerable and often complex issues. If, for example, we find that cue takers express preferences on the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty that differ from their hypothetically fully informed preferences, what conclusions should we draw? We might investigate the cue-taking process in an effort to identify how the public was led astray. But we would surely not suggest that citizens must read the treaty themselves. Such demands on the public are unrealistic. Even people who devote their lives to politics cannot become experts in all matters. In a complex political system with a seemingly boundless array of issues, both the most and the least engaged must rely on cues for at least some issues.

THE CUE-GIVING ENVIRONMENT AND DEMOCRATIC GOVERNANCE

Skeptics claim that ordinary citizens are ill suited to the demands of democracy. These critics frame the democratic dilemma – public ignorance combined with public decision-making power – as the responsibility and burden of the ordinary individual, implicitly asking "What kind of citizens do we need to make democracy work?" The bulk of this paper is an exploration of one aspect of this question – the use of elite cues by ordinary Americans to compensate for limited substantive information. But effective cueing requires both cue takers and cue givers, and so in this final section we turn our attention to the latter, asking, in essence, "What kind of cueing environment do we need to make

democracy work?" In doing so, we follow Lupia's (1994, p. 72) suggestion that instead of chancy and high-cost endeavors to broadly educate the public,

> a deeper understanding of how people adapt to the uncertainty that characterizes many of their important decisions suggests that directing our efforts into the provision of credible and widely accessible "signals" may be a more effective and cost-effective way to ensure the responsiveness of electoral outcomes to the electorate's preferences.

In this spirit, we highlight the major attributes of and barriers to an effective cueing environment.

Basic Attributes of an Effective Cueing Environment

Page and Shapiro (1992, p. 356) suggest that "authentic" or "enlightened" public opinion can emerge when "the public receives useful interpretations, and correct and helpful information – information and interpretations that help it move toward the policy choices it would make if it were fully and completely informed . . ." The obstacles to this state of affairs, Page and Shapiro go on to say, are a lack of trustworthy cue givers or an information flow that is distorted or monolithic (see also Bartels, 1998, Shapiro, 1998, and Zaller, 1992 for further discussion of "enlightened" public opinion). The ideal environment, then, should provide cues that are credible, comprehensive in terms of both breadth across the political spectrum and depth within issues, and balanced in the frequency of presentation in the mass media.

Credible Cue Sources

Decision makers will take cues only from certain sources. As delineated above, decision makers must believe that cue givers are knowledgeable and truthful. Since effective cueing hinges on the matching of predispositions (i.e. values and interests), cue givers must be credible in the sense of being trusted to reveal their true political predispositions and policy preferences. The term "credible" does not imply that the cue giver is like-minded, virtuous, knowledgeable, or trustworthy in any universal sense. Rather, a credible cue giver is one that a cue taker perceives to be knowledgeable about the issue at hand and honest in revealing his or her predispositions and policy preferences.

There are thousands of potential cue givers, and determining whether each one is knowledgeable and truthful carries impossibly high informational costs – costs so high that cue taking would no longer be a shortcut. Therefore, decision makers are more likely to take as credible those cue givers who are identifiable either as individuals or organizations. Identifiability facilitates the assessment of credibility by providing a reputation for honesty and expertise (or their lack) based on past experience.

Comprehensive Range of Cues

The "range of cues" spans two dimensions. One dimension is the breadth of cues across the political spectrum, the other dimension is the depth of specialization for each issue. For example, a narrow breadth of cues might include only messages from leaders of the two political parties. By contrast, a wide breadth of cues would provide messages from leaders across the political spectrum, including socialists, communists, libertarians, anarchists, and so on.

Yet the range of available cues could span the political spectrum while still having a shallow depth of specialization. For example, a proposal for greater expenditure on prison construction could have cues from a broad range of political interests, from retribution-seeking conservatives to rehabilitation-minded liberals. But without cues from issue-specialists, the cue environment is still shallow. Issue-specific depth might include cues from private prison corporations, members of the Prison Moratorium Project, union leaders representing prison guards, and University of Pennsylvania criminologist John DiIulio. Note that depth of specialization includes not only academic or expert specialists, but also citizens and activist organizations that mobilize around a particular interest.

We expect that a broader and deeper range of cues would disproportionately help the most politically engaged. First, the politically engaged are more likely to actually receive a fuller range of specialized political ideas, as they generally devote more time to pursuing political information. Second, the politically engaged are generally more adept at identifying the political values of the cue giver and are therefore more likely to accept the message best matched to their own values. The key benefit is precision – with more specialized cues across a broader political spectrum, the politically engaged are more equipped to find the cue giver that most accurately approximates their own interests and values.

Balance of Voices

Balance refers to the frequency distribution of cues across the political spectrum available in the mainstream media. While a comprehensive range of cues is likely to help the most politically engaged, we suspect that a balance of cues is likely to help the least politically engaged. For example, if the mass media contain predominantly centrist cues from public officials, and cues from alternative and minority voices are infrequently heard, only the most engaged will receive these alternative cues; the least engaged will miss them entirely. Imbalance renders some cues less visible, and this lower visibility means that some decision makers, particularly the least engaged, will miss the cue that best fits their predispositions.

A broad representation of cue givers in the media would facilitate involved citizens' cue-based preference formation. But if the media were to give equal

representation to all potential cue givers including "fringe voices" whom few citizens would turn to for policy guidance, many would find it harder, not easier, to identify the appropriate cue givers and discern their policy endorsements. Either of these extremes would ill serve both cue giving and democratic decision making more generally.

A Limited Assessment of the Current Cueing Environment

In closing, we briefly touch on some major forces and potential problems in the current cue environment, considering both the factors shaping cue "production" and the dissemination of cues by the mass media.[15]

Cue Production

Are cues from politicians and government officials credible, comprehensive, and balanced? Competition among elected officials ensures some variation in political perspective and provides politicians with strong incentives to give accurate information. As Carmines and Kuklinski (1990, p. 266) write:

> By its very nature, the competitive legislative process ensures alternative voices and signals from which citizens can choose. Moreover, most congressional members intend to remain in the "market," which greatly reduces – although, unfortunately, does not eliminate – the likelihood of their betraying or pulling the wool over the public's eye. Facing re-election and internal competition supposedly collars the potentially recalcitrant and/or deceitful legislator.

Furthermore, electoral incentives encourage reputation building through ongoing policy leadership and entrepreneurship. A handful of legislators – mostly Senators and some House members – develop reputations, become easily identifiable for particular value and policy stances, and establish known track records of reliability. For example, Claude Pepper, the long serving U.S. Representative from Florida, was widely recognized as an advocate for the elderly.

Party structure can also facilitate trusted cue giving. In a system of single-member plurality districts, candidates have an incentive to coordinate policy positions with the party. Coordination helps to create a reliable party "brand name." Furthermore, party leaders can establish penalties for lying (Cox & McCubbins, 1994). These factors can make party a precise and trustworthy cue, so that when individuals hear a Democratic senator's policy preference, even if they do not recognize that particular Democrat, the label conveys a specific history of ideology and reliability (analyses of congressional voting suggest that the two major parties have become more homogeneous, and therefore more useful as cueing sources, since the late 1970s; Poole & Rosenthal, 1997, 1999).

The structural incentives we have highlighted may be credibility promoting, but they may also be scope truncating. In some ways, the demands of

credibility and identifiability tradeoff with the benefits of a broad range of cues. For example, a reliable party "brand name" may promote precise and trusted cue giving, but only at the expense of diversity within parties. Moreover, the demands of electoral competition in a two-party system work to push the parties toward the middle of the political spectrum (Page, 1996; Downs, 1957). While this moderating effect of party competition appears to have diminished in recent decades (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Poole & Rosenthal, 1999), the political spectrum in the United States remains quite narrow in comparison to the multi-party European democracies.

The tensions between credibility and scope extend beyond elected officials and party politics to the broader universe of cues. When the requirements of credibility trump scope, the implication is that obscure groups will be ignored, mostly because they have no history of reliability and trustworthiness (Lupia & McCubbins, 1998, p. 207). Like the logic of accepting cues based on political party, "obscure" individuals probably have a better chance of becoming accessible cue givers if they are affiliated with credible institutions such as prestigious universities, well-known research institutes, or a handful of other long-standing, well-funded organizations. Consistent with this observation, Page, Shapiro and Dempsey (1987) found that media reports of experts' opinions have substantial influence over public preferences on a range of policy issues. This responsiveness of the public to experts' opinions underscores the importance of media "gate keeping" and interest group resources in determining who is an "expert" and which experts' views are heard by the public.

Cue Dissemination

Information about political issues rarely comes directly from political actors; rather, news media and professional communicators select, filter, and frame the information dispersed to the mass public.

In evaluating the cueing environment, perhaps the most consequential media norm is reliance on official government sources (e.g. Hallin, 1986, Bennett, 1990, Mermin, 1999, Page, 1996). Reliance on official sources stems from both professional norms of credibility and newsworthiness, and from the normal routines of news gathering. Public officials meet journalistic standards of source legitimacy, and officials' power to shape events makes their opinions more newsworthy (Bennett, 1990; Zaller & Chiu, 2000). Furthermore, the routine of "beat" reporting means that journalists establish ongoing relationships with their sources (Gans, 1979).

Reliance on official sources has a mixed impact on the cueing environment. On the one hand, it may be relatively easy for an individual to identify an official's political ideology and history of reliability; an "authoritative" source

by journalistic standards is probably an identifiable source for cue takers. If the speaker is well known or affiliated with a prominent institution, then a potential cue taker may be more capable of recognizing whether the speaker is trustworthy and knowledgeable.

On the other hand, when journalists rely on a limited number of similar kinds of official sources, they transmit this imbalance to the public. Reliance on official sources not only creates cue imbalance, but it also truncates the range of cues through a process referred to as "indexing." As Bennett (1990, p. 106) argues, the mainstream media "'index' the range of voices and viewpoints in both news and editorials according to the range of views expressed in mainstream government debate about a given topic." Indexing allows official sources to determine the parameters of debate as presented in the mass media, limiting the range of available cues and favoring the institutionally mainstream, the powerful, and the organized.

Trends in media corporate ownership also limit the range and balance of cues and information dispersed through the mass media. Media concentration and the rise of large media conglomerates raise concerns that ownership shapes coverage in the interests of American business in general (Herman & Chomsky, 1988) and corporate media owners in particular (Alger, 1998; Bagdikian, 1992; Pratte & Whiting, 1986; Snider & Page, 1997; Gilens & Hertzman, 2000). As Page and Shapiro (1992) emphasize, the quality of public decision making reflects the quality of the information available to the public. Media biases that limit the available cueing messages (just like media biases that limit substantive policy information) undermine the public's ability to participate in democratic decision making.

CONCLUSIONS

Normative theories of democracy often make demands on citizens that far surpass what the American public seems able to fulfill. As Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee wrote in their landmark study *Voting*.

> The Democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are (1954, p. 308).

Based on this lofty standard, the American public falls far short. But decision-making heuristics seem to offer a less demanding alternative by which citizens can form meaningful policy preferences. If elite cues and other decision shortcuts lead citizens to the same aggregate preferences that they would form if they had the time, interest, and expertise to reason through the substance

of each issue, then the public can fulfill its democratic role while remaining largely ignorant of the substantive complexity of government policy.

In the preceding pages we sought to clarify the process of elite cueing and summarize the existing literature. Citizens' use of elite cues in political decision making is well established. Moreover, we argued, cue taking can sometimes constitute a fairly nuanced and sophisticated process in which decision makers take into account not only the like-mindedness of a cueing source, but the relationship between their own predispositions, the predispositions of the cueing source, and the substantive content of the cue on a particular issue (e.g. Nixon's overture to communist China).

Yet while elite cues *can* provide an efficient shortcut to political decision making, the extent to which they are used and their effectiveness as a substitute for substantive knowledge remain unclear. The inability of large numbers of Americans to identify the positions of the major parties and presidential candidates on basic policy issues does not bode well. Even more significantly, "ignorance-induced" aggregate biases in public preferences appear to exist in a number of issue domains as well as in presidential voting.

An overall assessment of the American public's democratic decision making depends on the benchmark we choose to apply. Elite cues and other heuristics clearly facilitate citizen participation. Without such shortcuts, meaningful democratic participation would be impossible in a society as large and complex as our own. It is equally clear, however, that citizens' political decision making falls short of traditional democratic norms, with negative consequences for both individual preference formation and aggregate opinion as well. Yet we do muddle through, with the public – for better or for worse – playing a significant role in shaping government policy.

Elite cues are important, but imperfect, elements of democratic participation. Future research on heuristic decision making will need to address both citizens' propensities to use elite cues and the availability of such cues in the political environment in order to further illuminate the strengths and weaknesses of the American public's political decision making.

NOTES

1. When Downs wrote this selection in 1957 it was standard practice to use language which assumes that cue seekers and cue givers are exclusively male. We of course reject this assumption.

2. For a discussion of the role of personal networks in political decision making, see Huckfeldt and Sprague (1991, 1995).

3. As Converse (1964) suggested, citizens can be divided into "issue publics" based on their apparent concern or involvement with specific topics. Iyengar (1990), for example, reports that, net of general levels of political attentiveness, Jews are more knowledgeable

about the Middle East and blacks are more knowledgeable about civil rights. Furthermore, as Iyengar also shows, those who already possess relatively high knowledge about a particular issue are more likely to gain knowledge about that issue when exposed to new information in the news. See also Krosnick (1990) for a discussion of issue publics.

4. We do not explore the processes that account for differences across individuals in issue involvement. *Ceteris paribus*, we would expect individuals who perceive themselves to have a larger stake in an issue to be more psychologically and cognitively involved in that issue. Given the infrequency with which material self-interest is strongly connected with issue preference (Citrin & Green, 1990; Sears & Funk, 1990, 1991), perceived "stakes" in an issue may be symbolic as often as material (e.g. the higher involvement of American Jews with Middle-Eastern politics; Iyengar, 1990).

5. It should be noted that the van Knippenberg and Daamen's objective in this research was not to assess citizen decision making in a "real-world" context, but to evaluate the potential contribution of an "artificially" informed representative sample of the public. This project closely parallels James Fishkin's "deliberative polls" discussed below (e.g. Fishkin, 1995; Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Luskin & Fishkin, 1998).

6. Meta-analysis confirms McGuire's hypothesis that self-esteem is curvilinearly related to persuasibility (Rhodes & Wood, 1992).

7. Kuklinski, Metlay and Kay (1982) find a slightly but non-significantly larger impact of elite cues on the policy preferences of the less knowledgeable; they find nearly identical impacts of elite cues on the cost-benefit analyses of the two information groups (Table 5, p. 631).

8. Among respondents with the lowest education who disapproved of Reagan's performance, about 22% fewer expressed support for the defense build-up in the cueing condition than the baseline condition; among the most highly educated respondents, the difference between the cueing and control conditions was negligible. See Mondak (1994a), Fig. 1.

9. Zaller's research suggests that citizens with the lowest levels of political awareness should be the least likely to distinguish between cues from "like-minded" and "non-like-minded" elites. This may well be true, but Mondak's (1994a) study shows that under the right circumstances, even low-education respondents make use of elite cues by discriminating between cue givers who share their political orientations and those who don't. The circumstances that allowed Mondak's low-education respondents who disapproved of Reagan's performance to use the association of the Reagan administration with the defense build-up as a dissuasive cue were, first, that Mondak used an experimental design in which exposure to the elite cue was equalized across educational levels and, second, that the cue in question (i.e. the incumbent president) was familiar to even the least politically attentive respondents.

10. Contrast this account with Lupia and McCubbins' explanation of a decision-maker's proper response to communication from a non-like-minded source:

> Explanations of persuasion based on *ideology*, *affect*, and *partisanship* suffer the same fate as reputation. None of these factors is necessary or sufficient for persuasion in our model. To see why, consider the following example. You might really *like* Mr. A or know him to be a conservative like yourself but believe that he knows nothing whatsoever about policy B. In this case, you should not follow Mr. A's advice. Alternatively, you might believe Mr. A to be a knowledgeable, non-conservative, and unlikable person who nevertheless faces a strong incentive to reveal what he knows. In this case, you should follow his advice (1988, p. 63, italics in original).

Lupia and McCubbins' recommendation makes sense if what Mr. A reveals is raw information relevant to policy B. But if "following Mr. A's advice" means adopting his position on policy B, then clearly a cue-taker's judgments of ideological or partisan like-mindedness are critical in knowing whether to follow Mr. A's advice, ignore it, or adopt the opposite position on policy B to that endorsed by Mr. A.

11. Cue givers might also misrepresent their true preferences on a given policy in order to mislead cue takers about their true values or interests. For example, a strategic politician might publicly oppose an upper-class tax cut that she truly favors in order to credibly maintain the perception that she shares the interests of the middle class. In this case, she is using dishonesty about her preferences on one policy choice in order to shape the public's perceptions of her political orientations which in turn will enhance her ability to successfully cue the public on a related policy choice (say, a tax cut that appears more friendly to the middle class).

12. Unless they paid so little attention that they didn't recognize the source of the endorsements they encountered.

13. These figures are calculated from Luskin and Fishkin (1998), Table 3, columns 5 and 6.

14. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996, pp. 241–251) use a similar approach to that of Bartels (1996) and Althaus (1998). However, because Delli Carpini and Keeter compare the predicted policy preferences of their best informed and worst informed respondents, it is difficult to assess the difference of interest here – the gap between actual preferences and the expected preferences of a "fully informed" citizenry.

15. "The media," of course, represent a diverse array of information sources, and less popular perspectives are often found in less popular media sources. Our focus here is primarily on mainstream media because of its particularly central role in facilitating (or failing to facilitate) cue-based decision making. Our interest, after all, is in elite cues as shortcuts, and shortcuts are supposed to be easy and readily accessible. Furthermore, mainstream sources are often viewed as more credible and therefore more likely to be more influential cue givers. For example, Druckman (1998) found that an article attributed to the New York Times could change respondents attitudes about a KKK rally, while the same article attributed to the National Inquirer wielded almost no persuasive power.

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