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SOURCES OF MASS POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT: REJOINDER TO MARIETTA

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SOURCES OF MASS POLITICAL DISAGREEMENT: REJOINDER TO MARIETTA

ABSTRACT: *Do people tend to disagree over political issues because of conflicting values? Or do they disagree about which policies will most effectively promote shared values? In a previous article, I argued that the issues most people think are most important tend to fall into the latter category. On the issues of greatest importance to the mass public, most citizens agree about the ends that are desirable, but disagree about which policy means would best effectuate those ends. Consequently, disputes about facts—disputes about the actual effects of proposed public policies—lie at the heart of the most important divisions in contemporary American public opinion. However, people do not necessarily interpret their political disagreements this way. If they fail to recognize that facts that they see as self-evident are disputed by their opponents, they may see their opponents as having different values, since there could be few other explanations for their opponents' disagreement with them. However, evidence that disagreements about facts are really driving public opinion can be found by using conditional surveys, which ask respondents if they would support a given policy if they believed that it would cause specific negative consequences.*

In ''Paradoxes of Democratic Accountability: Polarized Parties, Hard Decisions, and No Despot to Veto'' (Murakami 2008), I argued while on some political issues, such as abortion, the main fissures in public opinion are based on the conflicting priorities that political opponents place on different ''values,'' or ends (e.g., the life of the fetus versus the

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freedom of its mother), on other issues—including most of those related to the economy and foreign policy—most members of the public tend to share the same end, even when they disagree about which policy, candidate, or party is likeliest to achieve this end. Thus, the vast majority of Americans want the same economic and foreign-policy consequences: They want lower unemployment, low inflation, peace, and the protection of American "national interests."

Donald Stokes (1963, 373) labeled controversies over the most effective means to shared ends "valence issues," while Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson (1980) referred to them as "hard" issues—because, to be *properly* decided, voters would have to do the taxing work of answering technical questions regarding the actual effects of proposed policies in achieving the shared end. Hard issues are aptly named because when there is consensus over the end, the source of disagreement usually concerns the *consequences* of the means that have been proposed to achieve that end. Sound social science is called for in deciding such issues, and sound social science is difficult to achieve, even for professionals. I argued that over the course of recent American political history, the issues in any given election that tend to be more important to more voters are the hard ones.

Morgan Marietta (2010) has now challenged my view in important and interesting ways. He and I agree that the public is generally too politically ignorant to deliberate well about hard issues for the very reason that they are hard: It is extremely difficult for ordinary citizens (or even social scientists) to discern what the actual consequences of a given public policy have been or will be. However, Marietta contends that the issues that dominate public opinion, fortunately are not these hard issues, but "easy" ones—in which the political contestants are seeking different ends. These are easy questions not in a metaphysical sense, and certainly not in the sense that they lend themselves to consensus, but in the special sense that they are less susceptible to being resolved through painstaking reasoning and research about *the contested real-world consequences* of a policy. Instead, according to Marietta, differences over these questions stem from conflicting value judgments *about the policies themselves*, independent of their real-world consequences:[1] that is, the policies taken in isolation from their real-world effects or effectiveness. If one has a stable set of values arranged in a coherent hierarchy, it is relatively easy to derive policy attitudes from these values.

The question dividing Marietta and myself is an empirical one. Does the American public care more about political issues in which values are *not* in dispute, but the effectiveness of a given policy in achieving those values *is*? This may seem like a question only for specialists in American public opinion, but it has broader implications. If value differences explain political disagreements about the most salient public issues, then (Marietta contends) a largely ignorant public is no impediment to sound democratic decision-making, as long as a majority is merely able to identify which politicians, parties, and programs *intend* to achieve the values that members of the public favor. In contrast, one might question the desirability of many of our political institutions and electoral processes if inferences about the actual effects of public policies are difficult (as Marietta and I agree) *and* are at the heart of the most important divisions of public opinion (in the minds of the members of the public). Since I defended democratic institutions on different grounds, I am not concerned to take up this normative issue with Marietta, who builds a defense of contemporary American democracy around its ''representation'' of people's values.

However, there are also broad implications for empirical research. When we view value differences as the ultimate source of political disputes, we will naturally want to know where these different values come from. Our answers will probably be sociological, psycho-sociological, or ''cultural'' in the usual (socio-cultural) sense of the term, as seen in Marietta's paper: For instance, we might infer that people who grow up around guns are likelier to feel unthreatened by them, while people who grow up around crime are likelier to feel threatened by guns. Thus, ''gun culture'' is a product of one's socialization, as opposed to one's ideas about the likely effects of gun control. Similarly, people who grow up Catholic are likelier to oppose abortion than people who grow up in other faiths; opposition to abortion is thus socio-cultural. (I agree that in these two cases, we are probably dealing with true ''values'' or ''cultural'' issues rather than ''consequentialist'' issues.) In the search for sociological, psycho-sociological, or socio-cultural causation, it makes sense to try to correlate political attitudes with demographic variables such as region, religion, and in other cases income, level of education, and so on, since such variables might represent sociological (environmental) contexts from which people draw their values. Demographic research is thus among the traditional research strategies of political scientists.[2]

Such research is conceptually similar to the "political socialization" research that was popular among political scientists in the 1970s (for example, see Jennings and Niemi 1968; Tedin 1974), in which, for example, children's party loyalty was often thought to be learned from one's parents as an irreducible matter of "identity," to use Marietta's term. ("People like us are Democrats," instead of, say, "Democrats stand up for the working man.") What unites "sociological," "psychological," and "socialization" research, in this sense, is that since the dependent variables—values or identity—are in the end unarguable matters of faith, as (Weber [1918] 1946) portrayed them, the independent variables affecting values or identity are unlikely to be derived from ratiocination or information as such (although they *can* be). Even "culture" is, in this line of research, treated not as a source of information about how the modern world *is* ("Businessmen are rapacious," "Politicians are corrupt"), but as a source of values ("Politicians *should* be honest"; "People *should* work hard"; "People like us use guns; therefore [somehow] guns are *good*").

In contrast, however, when we recognize divergent views about the real-world consequences of public policies as the source of disagreement about the desirability of the policies, we are saying that people disagree in their understanding of "the facts" at issue. Where might different interpretations of the facts come from?

Consider, for example, whether capitalism is, in fact, a system in which a rising tide lifts all boats, or is instead a system in which only the rich tend to benefit unless the government steps in. Sociological and psychological explanations for people's various answers to this type of question (including "class self-interest") are possible, but an equally plausible answer would be that people's conflicting understandings of the facts are being driven by different streams of information, such as the information they would obtain by reading op-eds in the *Wall Street Journal versus* those in *The New York Times*; the information they would obtain by listening to Rush Limbaugh *versus* National Public Radio; the information they would obtain by watching Fox News *versus* MSNBC; or the information they would obtain from having majored in business or economics in college *versus* having majored in sociology or history. If the *content* of people's *ideas* about the consequences of a social system (to continue with the example of the nature of capitalism) matters to people's policy preferences, then it may be insufficient to know where people grew up or how they were raised. Moreover, merely knowing

the level of a respondent's education or media usage may not suffice to detect these sources of political attitudes, because people with the same level of education or media usage might well have "learned" very different things.

Perhaps the example of people's attitudes toward capitalism seems too distant from everyday politics, but these attitudes might help explain, for instance, divisions between supporters and opponents of health-care reform, since the premise of the reforms, judging from the rhetoric of the reformers, was that unregulated health-care markets tend to harm almost everyone except the corporations that make money selling health insurance and pharmaceuticals. Conversely, the rhetoric of the opponents emphasized the supposedly beneficial consequences (cost reductions, wider availability) of implementing more "market-based" reforms. A "cognitivist" approach to understanding public opinion about such issues might investigate whether divergent attitudes are influenced by heterogeneous information flows emanating from the mass media, cultural media, and formal instruction.[3] The same approach might seek to derive people's divergent attitudes about particular issues, such as the war in Iraq, from the content of the information to which they are exposed (Shapiro and Bloch-Elkon 2008). This approach presupposes, however, that on the issues in question, large or small, value conflicts are not driving public opinion.

Policies as Means or as Ends

Marietta (2010, 314) seems to think that he is disputing that presupposition when he writes that "the compiled empirical evidence indicates that the public cannot understand and determine questions of policy means, but that it does understand and focus on competing ends." Yet I completely agree. In fact, my paper (Murakami 2008) assigned much weight to it: In light of the half century of findings of public ignorance about even such matters as what policies are being proposed, it stretches credulity to think that many citizens will have an easy time determining the consequences of public policies. By the same token, I argued, the public can be expected to have an easier time understanding and focusing on competing policies as ends in themselves. But this does not entail that competing ends are more *important* to the public, as Marietta assumes. Citizens' tendency to focus on value differences could simply be a

function of how hard it is to pursue the alternative course: trying to make accurate causal inferences about the effects of public policy. For the same reason, politicians, parties, and political activists may be better off trying to convince the public to support the policies they favor by portraying the policies as uncontested ends in themselves rather than as contestably effective means to uncontested ends. The health-care-reform debate may have been anomalously "consequentialist" in this respect, although there were, alongside the confusing arguments about the likely effects of the proposed reforms,[4] arguments about health care as a right *versus* health-care reform as an infringement on people's liberty—a classic conflict of "values."

I do not claim that citizens generally spend a great deal time and effort evaluating the effects, intended or otherwise, of government policies in a thoughtful manner. Some do so; some do not. The fraction who do so will vary from time to time and issue to issue. But even when there is a low median level of effort devoted to gathering information that might help predict the empirical consequences of a policy proposal, this is not necessarily evidence that most people consider those consequences unimportant. In fact, there is evidence to the contrary. I presented some of the evidence in the original paper, and repeat it here for the benefit of readers without immediate access to it.

In 2000, respondents in the American National Election Study were asked to name the most important problem facing the country, and their open-ended responses were coded by issue. Table 1 (based on Murakami 2008) shows that the five most popular responses were "hard" issues on which divisions seem clearly to be over which policies will achieve a consensually accepted end, as opposed to the top five responses in which public policies appear to be seen as ends (or problems) in themselves. When a specific policy is volunteered by the respondent as desirable or undesirable (e.g., [presumably high levels of] government spending, [presumably high levels of] taxation [or unfair distributions of the tax burden], [a presumably high degree of] militarization, or [too much or too little] anti-poverty/welfare spending), we would appear to be dealing with "easy" issues, where any divisions about the named policies would involve value conflicts: Is high taxation a good thing or not, in itself? Is "militarization"? (However, it is hard to believe that very many people think that high or low levels of spending on poverty/welfare are bad in themselves, rather than bad because of some assumed effect: They are insufficiently high to reduce poverty, or they are too high and thus

Table 1. The Most Important Problem, Top Five Answers, 2000

Hard Issues (divisive means)		Easy Issues (divisive ends)	
quality, cost of education	13.7%	government spending	4.0%
quality, cost of health care	10.4	welfare, anti-poverty	3.9
economy, unemployment	6.7	racial preferences	1.4
too much crime	5.3	military, arms	1.4
moral, religious decay	4.2	taxes	0.9
all mentions of an effect to be achieved by policy	55.6	all mentions of policies in themselves	22.9

Cells contain the percentage of respondents who offer a particular mention as the most "important problem facing the nation." Other mentions, which could be considered either hard or easy, or neither, totaled 21.5 percent.
Source: American National Election Studies, 2000.

encourage welfare dependency, etc. Similarly, people may be concerned about "taxation" because they think it discourages economic growth or burdens the poor. In this sense, we are probably *overestimating* the importance of easy issues when we code the open-ended responses this way.) None of these issues were named as the most important problem by more than 4 percent of the public. When all the "easy" issues are tallied, about 22.9 percent of the respondents mentioned some government policy or lack of policy as the most pressing problem.

In contrast, the proportion of the sample that named real-world states of affairs rather than policies (or lack thereof) was substantially greater—indicating, it seems to me, that respondents largely viewed policies as means to the end of correcting or improving the named states of affairs. In all, about 55.6 percent of the respondents mentioned some kind of unsatisfactory real-world condition as the most important problem. These findings are striking because the presidential campaign of 2000 was conducted during particularly prosperous and peaceful times, so that economic and foreign policy issues, which are likely sources of disagreement about the effects of public policy, were thrust to the bottom of the political agenda.

It is logical to infer that if these respondents believed that the problems they named were susceptible to political solutions—"moral or religious decay" might be one that is not—they would view the policies involved as instrumental to an *effective* solution to the problem. Thus, if

there were disagreements about these policies, it would be primarily because of different conclusions, or assumptions, about the policies' actual effectiveness in solving real-world problems—not because of a division of opinion about which states of the real world should be valued; and not because of a division of opinion about which policies or policy positions are "valuable" in themselves, regardless of their actual effects. For example, it seems plausible that the respondents would be united about the desirability of education that teaches children to read and write. Any division would be over how best to do this: Increase education spending? Reduce class sizes? Rein in teachers' unions? Promote charter schools? Establish education vouchers? Impose stricter quantitative standards (or abolish them, as they encourage "teaching to the test")? The political issues that *would* raise such thorny issues *if* voters paid close attention to them were the issues that most people thought were most important. In short, when people care about the consequences of a public policy, as indicated by their naming of a consequence as the most important problem facing the country, their disagreements about the policy are likely to be due to what they think the consequences of a policy are.

This may seem like common sense, but not to Marietta (and many other political observers). Take, for example, the issue of gun control, which Marietta (2010, 316–17) cites as an example of the type of divisive value issue that, he asserts, "dominate" the American political landscape. There are, no doubt, many people who have strong attitudes about gun control, either pro or con, that are rooted in value and cultural differences. Yet fewer than 0.9 percent of respondents listed gun control efforts as the most important problem in 2000. Likewise, fewer than 1 percent of the respondents listed illegal immigration, bilingual education, abortion, gay marriage, or other matters of the sort that are divisive because one's values or cultural identity dispose one toward favoring or opposing the policies in themselves, regardless of their real-world consequences.

According to Marietta (2010, 318, emph. added),

> two types of political issues tend to *dominate* our political discourse: value-laden issues and cultural identity questions. Rather than consensus ends such as an agreed-upon vision of prosperity or national security, the issues at the heart of American political divisions tend to invoke clear value conflicts: redistribution of wealth, foreign interventions, civil liberties, abortion, gay rights, etc. More subtly, cultural questions—which occupy a

> great deal of electoral politics—are not just value-laden but entail expressions of identity. For instance, illegal immigration and related questions regarding bilingual education center on expressions of national identity versus the broader claims of a multicultural society.

It may be true that such issues sometimes "dominate political discourse," but political discourse is generated by political elites, not ordinary citizens. These elites may, at any given time, think that "cultural" issues are overwhelmingly important, but that does not mean that members of the general public agree (Fiorina et al. 2005). While I do not dispute that public opinion on issues such as abortion, bilingual education, and gun control (among many others) may largely be determined by disagreements about values, it does not follow that public opinion, rather than "political discourse," is dominated by concerns about *this type of issue*. To assume that it does is to repeat the classic mistake that Philip E. Converse ([1964] 2006) warned against nearly half a century ago: projecting onto mass opinion the political preoccupations of journalists and other elite observers of politics.

Value Consensus or Dissensus?

It is worth emphasizing again that my disagreement with Marietta is empirical: How often in recent American history do values issues dominate the concerns of American voters? And therefore how likely is it that divisions in public opinion are driven by opposed values, rather than by opposed ideas about the consequences of extant or proposed policies? These are questions that can be answered only by research, not by *a priori* assertion. Similarly, I do not claim that a public consensus that the "quality of education," "quality of health care," or "economy" is the most important issue facing the country *entails* a consensus around values such as education that teaches students well, health care that heals, low unemployment, or low inflation; or that divisions over these issues *entail* divisions over how the effectiveness of proposed policies as means to share ends. But I believe that until we find evidence to the contrary, the *prima facie* default option is to treat the apparent value consensus on such issues as real, leaving policy disagreement on such issues to be explained by something else, such as self-interest, elite cues, or differences of opinion over the likely consequences of a policy.

Thus, it is *conceivable* that, as Marietta would have to argue, large numbers of people mean by "quality of health care" that they value illness over health, or long waiting times over short ones. It is *conceivable* that some people consider "high-quality education" to mean education that leaves children illiterate. But Marietta provides no empirical demonstration that such value divisions are hiding behind the *apparent* consensus over policy ends. For instance, he asserts without evidence that

> many of the issues cited as questions of means are at heart disputes over ends. Prosperity is perhaps the most frequently offered example of a consensus end, but as soon as the surface is scratched it becomes a divisive issue depending on the vision of the prosperity that is offered. Is it equal prosperity or a rising tide that lifts all boats, but some more than others? Prosperity *for whom* is always the question at hand, and "all of us" is not a viable answer. (Marietta 2010, 314)

What makes "prosperity for all" an "unviable" answer, in Marietta's opinion? Marietta is suggesting that prosperity for some must come at the expense of prosperity for others. In short, he is *disagreeing* with the belief that "a rising tide lifts *all* boats." Let us assume that Marietta is right, and that prosperity is a zero-sum game. That says nothing about how many people in a given time or place *believe* that it is a zero-sum game.

I suggest that Marietta is once again projecting onto the public questions with which the public may not be at all concerned. "Prosperity for whom?" is certainly the way that a great many political debates are framed by politicians, activists, journalists, and commentators. In thus framing the question, they make it easier to answer: Very few Americans are so inegalitarian that they would answer this question by saying, "Prosperity for a minority" (McCloskey and Zaller 1984). So is "Prosperity for whom?" really the question voters have in mind when they rank "the economy," "economic growth," "unemployment," or "inflation" as an important problem? Perhaps it does not even occur to them that prosperity *must* include only this or that group, or a majority *versus* a minority, rather than "everyone"—either because they believe that a rising tide lifts all boats, or because they have been taught that there is such a thing as "the common good," and that this is the appropriate object of their political concerns (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).

Take the most recent presidential general election, which was shaped in no uncertain terms by the unfolding financial crisis. The Republican candidate, John McCain, enjoyed a brief lead over the Democratic

candidate, Barack Obama,[5] until the long-simmering financial crisis turned into a meltdown on September 15, 2008, when Lehman Brothers went bankrupt. Suddenly Obama gained a lead that he never relinquished. In an NBC News Election Day exit poll a month and a half later, 63 percent of the respondents listed "the economy" as the single most important issue facing the country, while only 10 percent chose "the war in Iraq," 9 percent each chose "terrorism" and "health care," and 7 percent chose energy policy (these five options were the only available choices due to the survey design). Survey data show that the economically motivated voters, even if they did not consider themselves particularly knowledgeable about economic theory or well versed in the proposed remedies for the financial crisis (about which the candidates said little), were revealing a strong preference for a reversal of the effects of the crisis.[6] They may not have known how to solve the crisis, and they may not even have thought that they knew, but they did want the economy to improve, and for the most part, they agreed on what "improvement" would look like: they wanted unemployment to stop rising and the stock market, home prices, and retirement account values to stop falling. The question, for these voters, was which candidate or party was likeliest to end the economic calamity.

The alternative view, Marietta's, is that such apparent examples of public consensus over values are illusory. Voters concerned about the economy were not actually divided over the question of which candidate would stop the economic crisis, to the benefit of most or all Americans, but must instead have been divided by different answers to the question of which groups of Americans deserved the benefits of prosperity. Thus, Obama voters who said that the economy was the most important issue must have been in favor of a prosperity that would lift the boats of *some* Americans—middle- and lower-class Americans—who they thought (perhaps for egalitarian reasons) were more worthy of support. These voters believed that Obama would be more likely to assure prosperity for the middle and lower classes by reversing the financial crisis. But since, in Marietta's view, the empirical effects of public policy are rarely (if ever?) determinative, McCain voters who thought the economy was the most important issue must have *agreed* with the Obama voters that the effect of an Obama administration would be to reverse the crisis and help middle- and lower-class Americans economically. Why, then, would they have voted for McCain? It *must have been* because their values led them to

favor the prosperity of non-middle class, non-poor Americans—investment bankers, perhaps.

This scenario, too, is logically possible, but Marietta provides no evidence for it, and I suspect that for anyone except a Democrat who has never met a Republican, it is wildly implausible. The burden of proof is, I believe, on Marietta to show that disagreements about economic policy are actually driven by disagreements about which groups of one's fellow citizens deserve prosperity—a question determined by value commitments (or self-interest)—not by different assumptions about the sociotropic effects of different policies or candidates on the public as a whole.

Similarly, when Marietta ascribes divisions of public opinion about a war to "pacifism" or "militarism" as values in themselves, I would like to see the evidence. Do American supporters of a given war really favor war *per se*? (All the time? Against anyone and everyone?) Or do they simply differ with the opponents of a given war about the likely consequences of, and therefore the need for, that particular war—or wars in general *as a means to the end of national security*? Even consistently hawkish or dovish worldviews may (it seems to me) more plausibly be attributed to people's differences over whether "peace through strength" or "peace through international understanding" is, as a matter of empirical fact, the strategy that is likeliest to preserve peace without sacrificing national security.

That is speculation on my part, but there is a hard fact that I interpret as supporting it: the fact that people's opinions about wars can (and very often do) *change quickly*. Unless Marietta would contend that around 2006, there was a mass American conversion from militarism to pacifism, or from nationalism to internationalism, that had nothing to do with what most people were coming to believe about the necessity, cost, and success of the Iraq war, then the notion that public opinion was driven by an opposition between militarism and pacifism *per se*, or between nationalism and internationalism *per se*—that is, as desirable in themselves, not desirable due to their perceived consequences—cannot be sustained. It seems far more likely that the *content of the information about empirical conditions in Iraq* (including the failure to find weapons of mass destruction there) reaching the public in 2005 and 2006 had changed most people's perceptions about how well the war was going[7] and therefore how worthwhile it was—perceptions that radically altered their "consequentialist"[8] calculations of whether the *effects* of the war were desirable.

Disagreements about Policy Consequences

Marietta's critique of my argument consists of two closely related parts. The first is his denial of my claim that American public opinion tends to be united on the question of the ends people think are most important. The second is his denial of my claim that American public opinion tends to be divided by differences over the effectiveness of policy means to given ends, i.e., over the empirical consequences of public policies.

Here, too, survey evidence can be brought to bear. Zeljka Buturovic and Daniel B. Klein (2010) show, by analyzing the results from a December 2008 Zogby survey of American adults, that respondents who ideologically self-classify into different groups tend to have very different beliefs about the effects of a variety of economic regulations, as shown in Table 2.

In every case, the differences among the various groups are not only immense; they are fully consistent with the positions on these issues that members of the various groups would take if their attitudes about the policies in question were primarily consequentialist. Progressives tend

Table 2. Ideology and Beliefs about Consequences of Economic Policy

	Progressives	Libs.	Moderates	Conservs.	V. Conserv.	Libertarians
Restrictions on housing development make housing less affordable. (Disagree)	68%	60%	46%	25%	17%	16%
Rent control leads to housing shortages. (Disagree)	79%	71%	52%	23%	14%	16%
Free trade leads to unemployment (Agree)	61%	45%	40%	21%	16%	20%
Minimum wage laws raise unemployment (Disagree)	93%	86%	65%	18%	11%	18%
N	577	742	1,086	1,423	540	369

Source: Buturovic and Klein 2010, Table 2.

to favor minimum wage laws, and it turns out that they tend overwhelmingly to think that these laws do not cause the unemployment that libertarians and conservatives, who overwhelmingly tend to oppose these laws, believe that the laws cause. Never do the bulk of the respondents in a given ideological group think that the policy that tends to be advocated by that group[9] has undesirable consequences. We never see, therefore, what Marietta would have us expect to see: large numbers of people who apparently agree with a policy that is generally favored by that group, but who believe that the policy nevertheless causes undesirable consequences—because their agreement with the policy is dictated by the value of the policy in itself, not by their perceptions of the policy's effects on the real world. The difference between the bulk of the members of the various groups seems to revolve around the group members' divergent perceptions of what the consequences of these policies are, not around what type of consequence they count as desirable.

Conceivably, however, the correspondence between policy attitudes (imputed to the members of the subgroups by Buturovic and Klein)[10] and perceptions of policy consequences reveals that people are retrofitting their perceptions of the effects of the policies they favor (or oppose) to conform with their values, rather than the other way around. Perhaps libertarians *really* know that minimum wage laws do not cause unemployment, but convince themselves that they do cause unemployment so they can oppose minimum wages on predetermined grounds of "economic freedom." Or perhaps progressives really know that minimum wage laws do cause unemployment, but persuade themselves otherwise because of their predetermined commitment to "economic equality," which might be furthered by such laws. Another possibility is that the causal arrow points in the opposite direction: Value priorities flow from beliefs about the consequences of policies that seem to be consistent with those values. A third possibility is, again, that value priorities might also stem from other factors, such as self-interest, group identification, or partisan cues. A fourth possibility is that self-interest, partisan cues, or psychological processes directly determine these policy attitudes, unmediated by being first transformed into value commitments.

Obviously, "all of the above" are probable, both at the aggregate and the individual level, and varying in degree issue by issue. But my concern, like Marietta's, is whether we can make generalizations about *most* contemporary Americans' tendencies regarding the issues they take

to be *most* important. There is at least one method that might allow us to choose among these various interpretations of the data in reaching such generalizations: conditional polling.

Conditional Polling

In a conditional poll, we ask people whether they would support a given policy *if* it resulted in a certain negative consequence, and then we compare their responses to those of a control group that is merely asked if they support the policy. If value priorities, self-interest, group identification, or partisan cues were the source of political division about the policy, then there should be little difference between the two groups of respondents. If, on the other hand, the perceived consequences of the policy are the source of political division, then the two groups of respondents should, to that extent, express different preferences. I call this procedure *conditional polling*, even though *hypothetical polling* might also be used: the latter phrase might be misinterpreted as positing the results of a hypothetical survey, rather than as undertaking an actual survey in which respondents are asked a question about the hypothetical consequences of a policy.

In 1996, Gallup performed a conditional survey in which respondents were randomly asked one of two questions: either (1) whether they favored or opposed "raising the minimum wage from four dollars and 25 cents an hour to five dollars and 15 cents an hour"; or (2) whether they favored or opposed "raising the minimum wage if it resulted in fewer jobs available to low paid workers in this country." The results of this survey, displayed in Table 3, show a profound difference between the two groups. The hypothesized negative consequence has an extremely negative effect on support for raising the minimum wage, which collapses from 81 percent of respondents in the control group to about 40 percent in the treatment group. This effect might have been even larger if not for the fact that asking people to consider a hypothetical condition can affect only their conscious processing of the issue at that moment, not the conclusions reached by their previous online processing of what they understood at the time to be accurate information about the real-world effects of the policy (McGraw et al. 1990; Lodge and Taber 2000; Lavine 2002).

Table 3. Support for Minimum-Wage Laws in a Conditional Poll

Do you favor or oppose raising the minimum wage from four dollars and 25 cents an hour to five dollars and 15 cents an hour?	
Favor	80.6%
Oppose	17.4%
Don't know	2.0%
Would you favor or oppose raising the minimum wage if it resulted in fewer jobs available to low paid workers in this country?	
Favor	40.4%
Oppose	57.0%
Don't know	2.6%

Source: Minimum Wage: The Gallup Organization. Poll taken 5/9–5/12 1996, each subsample determined by randomization; N = 482.

Notably, the radical differences in opinion between the experimental group and the control group tell not only against values as driving the attitudes of the control group, but against self-interest, (affect) psychology, or partisan cues as the driver.

Certainly further empirical work is needed. One conditional poll is not decisive; no empirical findings are open to only one interpretation; and as noted, the relative impact of consequentialism (and other factors) is liable to vary from issue to issue and from time to time. However, taken together with the Buturovic-Klein findings, the results of this conditional poll suggest that a promising line of research would investigate the importance of citizens' assumptions about consequences, and hence previously processed information about consequences, in determining the public's policy preferences.

The Slide from Consequences to Values

My reply to Marietta's critique may have created the impression that I see politics as a realm of careful, rational "deliberation" about policy consequences. But this is because I have been rebutting the points of difference between my view and Marietta's. Since we do agree with the empirical literature demonstrating widespread, continuing, and international public ignorance, we also agree that people necessarily make many

simplifying assumptions in guiding them toward an attitude about a policy (or candidate).

One such popular assumption might be that consequences follow simply and intuitively from the *goals* of a policy (or a politician). The idea of unintended or counterintuitive effects would not enter the minds of voters who make this assumption, which Jeffrey Friedman (2005) has called the "intentions heuristic," simply because it is harder to envision unintended consequences than intended ones (which are, after all, likely to be spelled out in detail by the proponents of the policy). Marietta (2010, 315) sees this possibility as well: "Most citizens are likely to assume that the effects of policy means are obvious. . . . " But then he reaches the unwarranted conclusion that " . . . therefore . . . opponents disagree over ends." This does not follow. The intentions heuristic is consequentialist. That is, those who use it infer good consequences from the good intentions behind the proposed measure. Opponents may also use the intentions heuristic to infer bad consequences from what they take to be the nefarious motives of the politicians who favor the policy. Here we have, once more, a presumptive case in favor of the view that there is a consensus over what counts as a good consequence, and that the policy disagreement is caused by differences in opinion about the likelihood of achieving the good consequence due to the legislation.

Marietta, however, is describing a case in which most citizens use the good-intentions heuristic in evaluating a given policy. However, if most opinions about this policy are driven by consequentialist concerns, and most people use the good-intentions heuristic in evaluating the likely consequences of the policy, then polarization about that policy will, of necessity, be small. Minimum-wage laws may be an example, since they always command huge majorities of public support—81 percent in the control group of the Gallup conditional poll—despite the sharp differences in the predictions of consequences that were observed among self-identified ideologues in the Butorovic and Klein study. I interpret Marietta to be saying that when the consequentialist good-intentions heuristic is used by the proponents of a measure, the *opponents* must have a values-based rather than a consequentialist reason for their opposition. However, even disregarding the opponents' possible use of the equally consequentialist negative-intentions heuristic ("Minimum wages are just tools to protect union members' high-wage jobs from competition by the poor"), we cannot dismiss the possibility that the opponents are *not*

using the intentions heuristic but are deploying some different, more sophisticated consequentialist assumption, such as the one used by conservative and libertarian ideologues: that minimum-wage increases raise unemployment rates. Alternatively, they may think that minimum-wage laws hurt small businesses that cannot afford the higher wages, or that the laws raise prices. Whether this is true in a given case can be revealed by conditional polling. Assertions are no substitute.

It is also possible that since determining the actual consequences of a policy is so difficult, most people avoid doing so if they can. Most people have no factual basis upon which to come to their own conclusions about which side is right (or at least *more* right) in a debate about raising the minimum wage, reforming health care, invading Iraq, or passing a particular financial-reform bill: Voters have not observed the effect of these measures since the measures have not yet been taken. Nor can voters accurately infer the likely future consequences of these measures from uninformed speculation about past minimum-wage increases or the causes of high health-insurance costs or of the financial crisis. Since being confronted with one's own ignorance is unpleasant (survey respondents do not like being asked questions to which they do not know the answers [Bradburn et al. 2004]), a likely strategy is to semi-consciously abandon the enterprise of causal inference in favor of a decision procedure that requires less information gathering and less hard thinking. One such procedure is to attach intrinsic good or evil to a policy. However, this does not necessarily mean that *implicit* judgments about consequences are not still dictating policy attitudes. Conditional polling might reveal that even if control-group respondents said that they opposed health-care reform or the Iraq war as inherently wrong (e.g., because the insurance mandate violates individual liberty or because it is wrong to intervene in the affairs of another country), the experimental group would favor these policies *if* the alternative to the war were to allow a nuclear attack on New York City, or *if* the alternative to health-care reform were millions of deaths due to lack of health insurance.

Marietta (2010, 315) writes:

> Means are not disconnected from values. A policy proposal also reveals a value priority. There are rarely *neutral means* towards consensus ends; usually there are only *value-laden means*. Even if we had a consensus vision

> of prosperity, any means offered to achieve it will invoke value conflicts between individualism and communitarianism.

Marietta does not seem to realize that he is making an empirical claim, not a conceptual one. It is *not* true that voters necessarily *believe* that there are no value-neutral means toward achieving an agreed-upon end, or that every policy reveals a *disputed* value priority. In fact, it is not even true conceptually. Favoring the minimum wage on consequentialist grounds does not reveal a disputed value priority if the aim is to help low-wage workers, and if the opponents agree with this aim. Marietta is begging the question about whether disagreements about values or consequences motivate a particular division in public opinion because he himself seems to believe as a kind of universal truth the *legitimacy* of the decision procedure that might be adopted by a confused voter who turns away from conscious processing of consequences toward "values voting" as a way of making a decision and moving on. Connecting a value simply and quickly to a policy decision by using the intentions heuristic (for example) may be the modal form of preference formation, not because one holds to a value that others object to, but because conceptualizing an issue that way is easier and more seductive.

If there is such a natural tendency for voters to form preferences through the simple matching of values to policies, rather than through arduous processes of conscious inference about the consequences of policies, then there is a clear incentive for politicians and activists interested in mobilizing political support to employ appeals to core values that are easily tied to the policies they promote rather than try to convince voters that those policies will have positive consequences. In a complex world where the truth about cause and effect is not manifest, arguments about the empirical consequences of policy are rarely demonstrable and easily rebutted. As I wrote before,

> when given a choice between opposing a policy for its (even retrospectively) unseen or counterintuitive empirical effects, and portraying the policy as somehow intrinsically evil, astute politicians will seriously consider the latter course (Tetlock 2000). Voters will feel more convinced they have chosen correctly when they base their policy choices on "principles" or "values" rather than on the uncertain costs or benefits touted by "experts" whose reasoning they do not know. As a result, leaders of the public debate may be rewarded for framing consensual,

> "hard" empirical questions as divisive, "easy" questions of morality. This, at least, might be a promising research hypothesis. (Murakami 2008, 107)

If the public depends on elite discourse to provide the vocabulary and substance of political reasoning more generally, then the *appearance* of values-based preference formation among the general public may to some extent simply mirror the values rhetoric that dominates the appeals and arguments made by political elites, rather than revealing the causal importance of values differences in shaping voter preferences. Again, conditional polling can help us find out.

* * *

Marietta and I agree that most members of the public are incapable of successfully making causal inferences about the effects of public policy, and that they may therefore be unlikely to attempt to do so consciously. And both of us agree that much of the discourse in American politics—at least among pundits, candidates, journalists, and activists (and even political scientists)—focuses on, and even capitalizes on, voters' value priorities. But to avoid making the mistake that Converse identified so many decades ago, we should not project onto the public, by mere assertion, elites' rhetoric (or their genuine belief) that all (or even most) policy differences come down to value differences. This is by no means a necessary truth, and if we are open to the possibility that it is wrong in important areas of public opinion, it might allow us to cast a whole new light on the sources of public opinion. We do not yet have the evidence to determine how widespread consequentialist voting is. But I do think that the evidence discussed here is enough to raise healthy skepticism toward the notion that most Americans have value priorities that will rigidly compel them to support policies as ends in themselves, consequences be damned.

NOTES

1. I will sometimes call opinions on such issues "consequentialist" in a manner that is related to its use by normative theorists, even though what is often taken to be the opposite of consequentialism, "deontology" (a defense of an intrinsically valuable right, for example), is not the only sense in which values may "trump" consequences. "Consequentialist" voters in my sense are voters (or survey respondents) whose issue attitude is shaped by their perceptions of some *plausibly*

contestable real-world consequence of a policy, such as its effect on the business cycle, on the chances of a financial crisis, on employment levels, on income levels, on the prospects for (or the outcome of) a war, on crime rates, and so on. In contrast are voters of the sort whom Marietta portrays, who favor or oppose a policy because of its intrinsic value or odiousness, regardless of its consequences; or because of the intrinsic value or odiousness of favoring or opposing a policy (due to one's "identity"); or because of relatively incontestable effects of the policy, such as an increase in income equality as an end in itself that could be brought about by more progressive taxation.

It goes without saying that even a consequentialist necessarily judges consequences as good or bad according to what he or she takes to be some value, such as happiness, prosperity, or peace. Thus, consequences never trump *all* values. Perceptions of the negative consequences of a policy require that "negative" be defined in accordance with the top value in one's hierarchy of ends; these consequences may then trump the *intrinsic* attractiveness of the policy as defined by subordinate values (or by values that one does not share). However, what is at issue between Marietta and myself is not the logic of moral reasoning, but the frequency with which most Americans form policy preferences based on the intrinsic value of the policy as opposed to its contestable effects on the real world.

2. Another source of value disagreement may be biological: Genetic variation between individuals produces differences in brain chemistry and personality that may manifest themselves as fundamental political disagreements (for recent studies on genetics and politics see Peterson 1983; Alford et al. 2005; Fowler et al. 2008), presumably because such variation may have been evolutionarily advantageous to individuals in hunter-gatherer societies.
3. Other sources of public opinion about such issues might be self-interest (Citrin and Green 1990), group identification (Lippmann 1922; Conover 1988; Converse [1964] 2006; Nelson and Kinder 1996), and partisan cueing (Zaller 1992; Karp 1995; Goren 2005).
4. A Kaiser Family Foundation Health Tracking Poll in April 2010 found that 55 percent of the sample deemed its "feelings" about the law, just after it had been enacted, as "confused."
5. See http://www.realclearpolitics.com/epolls/2008/president/us/general_election_mccain_vs_Obama-25.html and http://www.pollster.com/polls/us/08-us-pres-ge-mvo.php. As the financial crisis claimed center stage in September, McCain's advantage disappeared. A CNN/Opinion Research survey on September 5–7 found McCain and Obama tied. The same surveyors' September 22 poll showed Obama with a 51/46 lead, which grew as the election approached. See "CNN Poll: GOP Takes Brunt of Blame for Economy; Obama Gains" at CNNPolitics.com
6. The September 22 CNN/Opinion Dynamics poll (see n5) found that 47 percent of those surveyed blamed Republicans for the financial crisis while only 24 percent blamed Republicans, and that Obama enjoyed a 10-point lead over McCain regarding which candidate would handle the economy better.

7. For instance, a Pew Research Center survey in September 2006 found that 47 percent of the public thought that "the military effort in Iraq [was] going well," and that 49 percent thought that going to war had been "the right decision," while 48 percent thought it was not going well and 43 percent thought it was the wrong decision. By November, only 32 percent thought the war was going well, and only 41 percent thought it was the right decision, while 64 percent thought it was not going well, and 51 percent thought it was the wrong decision ("Petraeus' Proposals Favored, But No Lift in War Support," 17 September 2007). At the beginning of 2004, more than 60 percent of the public agreed that "the United States did the right thing in taking military action against Iraq"; this number had declined to less than 50 percent at the beginning of 2005 and 40 percent by early 2006 (Elder 2007).
8. See n1 above.
9. I would venture that if, instead of matching ideological self-placement with views about the consequences of various problems, the authors had simply matched policy preferences with views about policy consequences, the match between favoring a policy and denying that it had negative consequences would be even closer. Conditional polling of the type discussed in the next section is one way to better understand people's views about policy consequences. Another would be open-ended interviewing.
10. See n5 above.

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