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Belief Systems and Political Decision Making

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Abstract and Keywords

This article studies the belief systems and political decision making and examines the observation that political scientists have the ability to tell a coherent story about citizens and public opinion. It reviews and summarizes the original story about citizens and politics, which can be found in Converse's 'The Nature of Mass Belief Systems'. The next section discusses three revisions of the story and the studies that gird them. The article ends with an examination of the validity of these three revisions.

Keywords: belief systems, political decision making, original story, citizens and politics, The Nature of Mass Belief Systems, revisions, political scientists

Buoyed by forty years of systematic research, political scientists should be able to tell a coherent story about citizens and politics. How much do citizens know about politics? Do they understand left–right ideology, and do they think in ideological terms? Do they hold meaningful attitudes on current issues? Do they update their beliefs and attitudes in response to changing conditions?

To a commendable extent, political scientists have met the expectation. Most, if asked, would tell a story much like the following: A sizeable segment of the adult population knows little about politics. Failing to understand the left–right context that structures debates among their elected representatives, they cannot adequately assess those debates or the policy proposals that generate them. When asked, these same citizens express policy preferences. These preferences wobble randomly over time, however, suggesting that most respondents fail to hold real opinions, but, to please the interviewers, answer the survey questions anyway. The relative few, in contrast, understand the contours of politics, hold firm beliefs and attitudes, and generally get things right.

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This story has a familiar ring, and for good reason. Converse (1964) first told it more than four decades ago, and scholars have been retelling it ever since. It is as though each new generation of scholars repeats the story as a rite of passage into the community of public opinion researchers. Its staying power is a testament to the impressive quality of Converse's writing, argument, and evidence.

(p. 46)

However, three revisions of the original story now exist. The "downbeat" revision questions the performance of Converse's exalted few, showing that these highly partisan individuals undertake a variety of arguably unreasonable mental gymnastics to retain their existing political attitudes. Ironically, their very understanding of politics provides the know-how necessary to perform the gymnastics. The "really downbeat" revision tells a story in which all citizens lack true political attitudes. At its limit, this revision tells a story of inevitability in which all citizens lack complete and coherent political beliefs and preferences.

The "upbeat" revision takes Converse in the opposite direction. In it, proportionately far more than 12 percent of US citizens know the basics of politics. They rationally update their beliefs and preferences in response to changing conditions. They also use general principles—core values and political ideology, for example—to inform their (real) attitudes and to make reasonably good choices and judgments. Moreover, citizens in some European countries display especially high levels of political knowledge, suggesting that political contexts can enhance citizen performance independently of individual capabilities and motivations.

The discussion in this chapter proceeds as follows. We first review and summarize the original story, as told in Converse's "The Nature of Mass Belief Systems" (1964) and elsewhere (Converse 1970, 2000; Converse and Markus 1979). Discussions of the three revised stories and the studies that gird them follow. The final, most important section of this chapter first addresses the validity of the three revisions, as we portrayed them. This concern arises because the revisionist stories stem from integrating the literature in a particular way, with which others might disagree.[1] The remainder of the section proposes that the public opinion literature has become schizophrenic. Some of the four stories contradict each other. In most cases, these contradictions arise because scholars act as though they are oblivious to the implications of others' research. This is most evident in but not limited to the case of upbeat revisionists, who favorably cite Converse's original study and then ignore the implications of his substantive conclusions.

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1 The Original Story

Converse began with the notion of political belief systems, which are integrated mental structures in which the component elements logically fit together. For most countries, he argued, the left–right character of elite discourse defines the logic (also see chapter by Mair in this volume). Political ideology serves as the glue that constrains and integrates political belief systems.

(p. 47)

Taking advantage of a 1956–58–60 American National Election panel study (ANES), Converse set out to determine how well US citizens understand left–right ideology. He employed several strategies. Most notably and most widely cited, he coded respondents' open-ended answers to 1956 questions asking them to express what they liked and disliked about the two parties and their 1956 presidential candidates. Using a generous coding scheme, Converse found that he could label only 12 percent of all respondents as either ideologues or near-ideologues, which is to say that they referred to the parties and candidates in left–right terms.[2] In other words, little more than one of ten Americans *actively used* ideological modes of thought.

The 1960 wave of the panel asked respondents whether they *recognized* one party as more liberal or conservative than the other. If they answered in the affirmative, they were first asked which party seemed the more conservative and then asked, “What do you have in mind when you say that the Republicans (Democrats) are more conservative than the Democrats (Republicans)?” If respondents said they did not see a difference, they were asked whether they wanted to guess whether people generally consider Democrats or Republicans as more conservative.[3] If the individual guessed, then he or she received a follow-up question asking what people had in mind when they called one or the other party more conservative. Twenty-nine percent refused to answer either closed-ended question. Another 8 percent tried to answer the closed-ended question but then could not answer the open-ended follow-up. About half of all respondents gave a right answer to both the closed- and open-ended questions. But only about 15 percent of all respondents, even in the presence of explicit priming, answered the open-ended questions in a way that reflected a broad understanding of liberal-conservative ideology, at least by Converse's standard.[4]

Converse also examined the inter-item correlations among responses to policy preference questions and found them to vary from weak to non-existent. People who took a liberal position on one issue did not necessarily take a liberal position on another. Equivalent correlations among a sample of incumbents and challengers running for the 85th Congress were markedly higher, underlining the greater ideological consistency among this elite group.[5]

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On every front Converse considered, the evidence told the same story: most people show little understanding of ideological politics. He identified issue publics, small numbers of people who had become knowledgeable about a specific issue or two, but the overall level of understanding left much to be desired. The relatively few who understood left–right politics tended to be better educated, more interested in politics, and generally more similar to the politicians who represented them.

(p. 48)

In principle, people could fail to grasp liberal-conservative ideology and still hold meaningful attitudes. To explore this possibility, Converse traced respondents' across-time opinions on a single issue, power and housing, using the 1956-58-60 ANES panel study. The item read as follows: “The government should leave things like electrical power and housing for private businessmen to handle.” He chose this issue because it represented a limiting case: neither politicians nor anyone else discussed power and housing during the four-year period and thus those who expressed real opinions on it should not have changed them (Converse 1970). Many people indicated they lacked an opinion, a finding that fell by the wayside in subsequent critiques and discussions of Converse. Among those who answered the (agree-disagree) item, most appeared to answer randomly. Only a small proportion—about 20 percent—held stable attitudes across all three time periods. Converse did not report—presumably the small number of cases prevented him—whether those who held fixed opinions across time included the 12 percent whom he had labeled ideologues or near ideologues.

Sensitive to the possibility that the 1956-58-60 results stemmed from the choice of issues and the time frame of the study, Converse and Markus (1979; also see Converse 2000) revisited the issue instability thesis using the 1972–74–76 ANES panel study. They found, once again, that partisan identification changed relatively little across time. But just as Converse found earlier, issue preferences generally lacked stability. This time, however, there were exceptions: preferences remained highly stable on abortion, busing, and legalization of marijuana, what Converse and Markus called the new moral issues. Moreover, the four-year continuity coefficient on the seven-point ideology scale was a relatively high .56, suggesting that many people remain ideologically consistent across time. This finding seemingly challenged Converse's original conclusion that only a relative few people understand ideology. The authors explained the size of the continuity coefficient on two grounds: first, 35 percent or more of the respondents failed to place themselves on two successive administrations of the scale, and thus did not enter into the calculation of the continuity coefficient; second, substantial numbers of the remaining respondents placed themselves at the center of the scale, presumably because they did not understand left–right ideology. Converse and Pierce (1986) reported similar findings among French citizens. Unlike the earlier American studies, the France study included a two-wave elite panel. Moreover, the elite and mass panels used identical questions, which allowed the researchers to speak more confidently than Converse could earlier to the mass–elite differences.

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Among Converse's many contributions, establishing a criterion by which to determine whether people hold true attitudes arguably stands as the most important. Before he wrote, a researcher would (reasonably) assume that respondents' one-time answers represented their real preferences. That assumption will not do, Converse showed. The key is whether respondents express essentially the same preferences *over time*. Only when they do can the researcher legitimately construe a stated preference *at any one point in time* as real. We will return to this insight later.

(p. 49) 2 The Downbeat Revision

Converse did not explicitly state that the relatively few citizens who understand politics and hold real attitudes carry the day for democratic governance; presumably he thought so. Others have carried the notion forward in one fashion or another. Luskin (1990, 331) states boldly that in a representative democracy "only a small proportion of the population can participate in politics to the fullest." In his mind, these are Converse's relative few. When Althaus (1998, 2003) and Bartels (1996) conduct simulations to determine whether the less informed would hold the same policy preferences as the more informed if they possessed more information, they assume that the more knowledgeable set the standard; they hold the right opinions. But do informed citizens warrant an exalted status in democratic governance? Recent evidence suggests that they might not.

At the time Converse wrote, the dominant psychological theories were cognitive-motivational, emphasizing in particular the individual's desire to maintain belief-attitude consistency. Trained as a social psychologist, he knew those theories well. For reasons only Converse knows, he chose to emphasize cognition over motivation in "Mass Belief Systems."[6] During the two decades following its publication, psychology and political psychology did the same, turning to cognition-dominated theories of information processing. Only recently have researchers in both fields begun, once again, to account for the effects of motivation.

Why is this history important? Once political scientists began to consider how motivations affect citizen decision making, they generated findings that shifted attention from the many who do not understand politics to the relatively few who do. Precisely because they understand politics, it appears, these relatively few are able to employ an array of mental gymnastics to maintain their existing beliefs and attitudes.

Under normal circumstances, when the political environment is not constantly bombarding citizens with belief-challenging arguments and information, these individuals often hold factually wrong beliefs that reinforce their existing attitudes. In other words, they can easily believe what they want to believe, and do. For example, Nadeau and Niemi (1995; Nadeau, Niemi, and Levine 1993) found that respondents who saw Hispanics as a source of crime were more inclined to overestimate their size than those

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who did not. The well educated and politically astute were especially vulnerable to such bias.

So what happens when politically sophisticated people hear an argument or receive factual information that challenges their political preferences? Do they adjust their beliefs and attitudes accordingly? Taber and Lodge (2006) conducted experiments in which they asked subjects to evaluate arguments about various (p. 50) policies. They found that subjects evaluate attitudinally congruent arguments as stronger than attitudinally incongruent arguments; counter-argue contrary arguments and uncritically accept supporting arguments; and seek out confirmatory evidence. These mental processes, in turn, lead to attitude polarization, that is, a strengthening of the original attitudes. More relevant here, strongly partisan and politically astute respondents show an especially strong proclivity to rely on these processes.

Similarly, in unusually high information environments where challenging facts persist, these attentive and knowledgeable individuals ultimately change their beliefs; but then they find means to retain their political attitudes. Panel studies conducted over the duration of the Iraq war found that strong Republicans maintained their support for the war, despite worsening conditions, by interpreting existing conditions and predicting future ones to their advantage. They construed US troop casualties as less severe than, for example, weak Republicans did, and also predicted lower levels of future casualties. And when the Bush administration itself acknowledged that weapons of mass destruction probably did not exist in Iraq, politically astute Republicans attributed their absence to one of two factors: they had been moved to another country or Saddam had destroyed them just prior to the US invasion (Gaines et al. 2006).[7]

One might justifiably argue that much of this evidence reflects healthy skepticism on the part of the relative few; politically sophisticated people should resist change. However, at some point this resistance is no longer reasonable. In Taber and Lodge's words (2006, 22), “skepticism becomes bias when it becomes unreasonably resistant to change and especially when it leads one to avoid information…. And polarization seems to us difficult to square with a normatively acceptable model (especially since the supporters and opponents in [a] policy debate will *diverge* after processing exactly the same information)” (original italics). They might have added that these mental gymnastics greatly reduce the capacity of the citizenry to provide democratic intelligence, that is, to let policy makers know whether existing policies are failing or succeeding.

The downbeat revision, then, differs qualitatively from Converse's. The difference lies not with who knows what about the general contours of politics; on this, the two tales converge. Nor does it lie with the politically uninformed; in both instances, they play a limited role in democratic governance. Rather, it lies with the performance of the politically knowledgeable; in the story recounted here, they often fail to hold accurate factual beliefs, and they devote most of their mental energies to maintaining their

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attitudes, often unreasonably. In short, they fail to provide the guidance of which they otherwise would be capable.

(p. 51) 3 The Really Downbeat Revision

Converse concluded that relatively few people understand ideological politics and hold true attitudes. The downward revision, by introducing motivation, raises questions about the performance of these few. It generates an unsettling question: does democratic governance lack a compelling rationale?

In the really downbeat revision, this question takes on added meaning. It reveals a citizenry whose answers to survey questions about politics and policy reflect the considerations that happen to come to mind. In turn, which considerations come to mind depends on the political communications the individual recently received. These "top-of-the head" answers imply that while people might express "opinions" at any moment, they are not fixed and thus not true. This verdict applies to all citizens, not just the less informed.[8]

Political scientists will immediately recognize this story; John Zaller developed it in his widely read and acclaimed *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992), which builds more directly on Converse than any other single study. He develops a formal model based on axioms, which he summarizes as follows (1992, 51): "Opinion statements, as conceived in my four-axiom model, are the outcome of a process in which people *receive* new information, decide whether to *accept* it, and then *sample* at the moment of answering questions. For convenience, therefore, I will refer to this process as the Receive-Accept-Sample, or RAS, model." People's attention to politics determines whether they receive information, and their ideological predispositions and, more generally, core values shape whether they accept it.

Zaller offers varied evidence in support of his model. He undertakes a survey experiment in which he asked half of the respondents a series of standard National Election Study questions on aid to blacks, federal job guarantees, and the proper level of government services. The other half received the same questions, but right after they answered the items they were asked to stop and think about the ideas that went through their minds as they answered. He shows that which ideas, or considerations, come to mind strongly shapes the attitudes that respondents express. More important, he shows that these considerations vary across time, and thus so do people's expressed attitudes.

The other data consist of American National Election Surveys combined with coded *New York Times* news stories. In an impressive set of empirical analyses, Zaller shows that when politicians and other political activists agree on an issue—support for a US invasion, for example—citizens think as one. When elites polarize, citizens do also.

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(p. 52) Attentive citizens, who are strongly disposed in one ideological direction or the other, show the greatest polarization. That is because these individuals simply echo what their preferred party leaders say.

Bartels takes the implications of Zaller's work to a more extreme conclusion than Zaller did. In a chapter of a book dedicated to Converse, Bartels (2003) distinguishes between attitudes and preferences (a distinction that we have not made in our discussion). He argues that people hold attitudes—psychological tendencies—but not preferences—definite and particular expressions. Borrowing heavily from the Tversky–Kahneman research on framing effects (1982, 1986; also see Iyengar 1987, 1990; Quattrone and Tversky 1988; but see Druckman 2001, Druckman and Nelson 2003), as well as Zaller, Bartels concludes that the political environment strongly shapes how these psychological tendencies become manifested. He concludes:

> [T]he common view of political scientists seems to be that the signs of "casual and shallow" thinking that Converse took as evidence of non-attitudes may characterize some of the people some of the time, or even most of the people most of the time, but are by no means endemic. My own reading of the evidence is more pessimistic. At least if "attitudes" are taken to mean logically consistent summary evaluations of any conceivable political object…then it seems clear to me that even splendidly well informed, attentive citizens will routinely flunk the test. (2003, 63)

> [T]he evidence already in hand provides rather modest grounds for imagining that the context dependence of political attitudes…is simply a result of ignorance, inattention, or bias, to be remedied by more careful thought or unfettered deliberation. For the moment, at least, it seems to me that we must probably accede to [the] conclusion that the context dependence of preferences is an unavoidable consequence of basic cognitive and evaluative processes. (64)

The fundamental shortcomings of the human thought process, especially when exacerbated by the nature of competitive politics, preclude the kind of democracy that normative theories prescribe. Citing Riker (1982, 244), Bartels reaches this grand conclusion (2003, 74): " 'popular rule' is impossible but…citizens can exercise 'an intermittent, sometime random, even perverse, popular veto' on the machinations of political elites." This is a far more excitable conclusion than Converse's!

4 The Upbeat Revision

Until now, the discussion has progressed toward increasingly more downbeat conclusions about the nature of public opinion and citizen performance. Not all research has moved in this direction. To the contrary, an accumulation of research reaches far more upbeat conclusions than Converse reached. Because many scholars have contributed to it, and

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often from different perspectives, the upbeat revision is less cohesive and self-evident than the other two revisions. It is every bit as important.

Thirty-two years after “Mass Belief Systems,” Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) undertook the single most comprehensive analysis of political knowledge and (p. 53) information. The authors did not limit their definition of political knowledge to ideological understanding, asking instead what US citizens know with respect to the rules of the game, the currently important political actors, and the substance of domestic and foreign affairs. They take advantage of a large number of existing surveys, as well as their own, to determine the percentages of the respondents who provide the right answers to (mostly) closed-ended survey questions. Warning that “it is meaningless to talk about how much the ‘public’ knows about politics” (269) given the unequal distribution of knowledge across citizens and across specific survey items, they nevertheless conclude that “more than a small fraction of the public is reasonably well informed about politics—informed enough to meet high standards of good citizenship” (269). Although Delli Carpini and Keeter do not explicitly define “more than a small fraction,” they clearly mean it to include far more than 12 percent of the citizenry. In other words, they find a notably more knowledgeable citizenry than Converse did. The authors also report that levels of political knowledge among US citizens did not change over the past fifty years, which eliminates a handy explanation of the discrepancy between their and Converse's conclusions.

Not only does the upbeat version find a relatively informed citizenry, it also finds citizens that act as Bayesian rational updaters when new information comes their way (Gerber and Green 1998; Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2004). For example, Democrats, Republicans, and Independents alike update their beliefs about the economy and their approval ratings of presidents. If the economy worsens, for example, people say the economy is weakening. Moreover, they update their beliefs in the same, expected direction and to the same extent.[9]

The preceding works portray a citizenry who ground their beliefs and attitudes in reality, implying that people hold true beliefs and attitudes. Many other studies, far too many to recite here, convey the same message. Kinder and Winter (2001) used the 1992 National Election Study to explore the black-white divide on racial and social welfare issues. They identified significant attitudinal differences across the two races on most of the attitudinal items, all in line with what one would expect. In every instance, African Americans expressed more liberal opinions, overall, than whites did. In the 1992 presidential election, of those favoring aid to minorities 69 percent voted for Bill Clinton while only 17 percent voted for George Bush; of those favoring national health care 61 percent voted for Clinton while 20 percent voted for Bush; and of those opposing the death penalty, 70 percent voted for Clinton and 19 percent voted for Bush (Erikson and Tedin 1995). These dramatic differences shout loudly: people hold meaningful political attitudes.

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Moreover, they effectively draw on their core values and political ideologies when forming their attitudes and candidate evaluations. Feldman (1988) shows that how much people valued the work ethic and equality of opportunity shaped their evaluations of Ronald Reagan as president. Those who strongly favored equality of (p. 54) opportunity, for example, supported liberal government policy more than those who opposed it. These assessments of government policy, in turn, shaped how favorably people evaluated Reagan's positions. Those who expressed support for the work ethic held more positive images of Reagan than those who did not.[10] Equally compelling, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) demonstrate that people use a hierarchically structured belief system to form foreign policy preferences. Core values such as ethnocentrism and moral beliefs about killing serve as the foundation. In-between these core values and specific foreign policy preferences are what Hurwitz and Peffley call postures. Functioning as mediators, they include themes such as whether the government should pursue an isolationist policy, and whether the government should adopt an aggressive stance in its relationships with other countries. Hurwitz and Peffley demonstrate that ordinary citizens, even those who know little about foreign policy, draw on this hierarchically structured belief system to infer specific preferences.

Others working in the upbeat perspective show, seemingly in contradiction to Converse, that citizens use their self-proclaimed ideologies to make appropriate candidate choices and evaluations. For example, Levitin and Miller (1979) find that some Democrats called themselves conservatives and some Republicans called themselves liberals in the 1972 and 1976 presidential elections. Using the 1972–6 panel data, they also show that the individual-level ideological continuity correlation is .65, compared to .80 for partisan identification. Ideological self-placement looks remarkably stable across time. Most significantly, ideology and partisan identification independently shape the vote; far more liberal than conservative Democrats support Democratic candidates, and so on. In a follow-up and more thorough study that covers all elections from the 1950s through the 1990s, Miller and Shanks (1996) argue that enduring ideological predispositions play a major role in shaping voters' reactions to election campaigns and their presidential choices.

Let us pause and summarize the upbeat version as we have stated it thus far. Substantial informational gaps exist between the most and least informed. Nevertheless, a sizeable majority of citizens grasps at least some of the basic political contours. Even more impressively, people appear to update their factual beliefs consistently with changed conditions. They notice, for example, when the economy falters or improves. They hold real attitudes. African Americans consistently take more liberal policy positions than whites, for example; and those who hold liberal attitudes show markedly greater support for Democratic presidents. In addition, citizens use their core values and political ideologies to derive “the right” policy preferences and choose “the right” candidates.[11]

(p. 55)

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Cross-national studies also contribute, albeit indirectly, to the upbeat revision. Early research, some of it by Converse himself (Converse and Dupeux 1962; Converse and Pierce 1986), reported low levels of issue constraint and ideological understanding (Butler and Stokes 1969) among French and British citizens. A later and more comprehensive study of five countries—Austria, Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States—essentially replicated Converse's original analysis, including the accounting of non-responses, and identified higher levels of ideological understanding, overall, suggesting an over-time increase in comprehension (Klingemann 1979*a*, 1979*b*).[12] Dalton (2002) attributes this change in comprehension to increased education levels and the greater availability of mediated political information.

Moreover, Klingemann (1979*a*, 1979*b*; also see Dalton 2002) found that the level of ideological sophistication varied across the five countries. German and Dutch citizens showed more understanding of left–right ideology than citizens in the United States and Great Britain. This finding suggests that characteristics of political systems—the structure of the party system, the availability of ideologically based information, and so forth—shape how much citizens know about ideological politics. In an attempt to answer this question more directly, Gordon and Segura (1997) studied more than 11,000 respondents in twelve countries. They found country-level factors to have the larger effects and to account for more of the variance in political sophistication than individual-level characteristics. For example, people who lived in countries with national proportional representation and multiparty systems did better at placing parties on a left–right scale, all else equal, than those who did not. Institutions can enhance (or inhibit) what people know about politics, quite independently of their own motivations and capabilities.[13]

5 An Arguably Schizophrenic Literature

The preceding discussion has covered much territory: from Converse's original and widely cited story to three revisions of it. Two of the three revisions reach more pessimistic conclusions about citizens and public opinion than Converse did, the other a more optimistic conclusion. Such variability in scholars' evaluations raises two questions: Is the research enterprise schizophrenic? In any event, how could scholars reach such differing conclusions? We will address these matters below. First, however, do the three revisions represent valid characterizations of the literature?

(p. 56)

This would be a readily answerable question if a single, right characterization served as the standard. Of course, it does not; if it did, we would not be entertaining the question. Scholars do not always agree on how to characterize a single study, let alone on how to integrate many studies. Chronology sometimes serves as the basis for integration, but the

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three revisions do not follow a single chronology, from oldest to most recent. If the four stories followed a natural evolution from, say, Converse to the upbeat version, only a chronological ordering would do. That is not the case.

Instead, therefore, the constructions of the revisions reflect a conscious effort to identify distinct and markedly different stories. The first two revisions—the downbeat and really downbeat revisions—emerge from relatively small bodies of literature that most students of public opinion would acknowledge as well-defined research programs (albeit by more than a single author or group of coauthors). Political motivation anchors the first program, ambivalence and its implications the second. The upbeat revision draws on more highly disparate literatures, to be sure, but that alone does not undermine its validity as a characterization. Improper interpretation of those literatures is another matter. We made every effort to remain faithful to them. In the end, we leave it to others to demonstrate the errors of our way.

Right or wrong, the integration of the literature into Converse's original story and three revisions reveals a dismayingly high number of contradictions. Converse and the really downbeat revision disagree on the existence of true attitudes among the few who understand politics. Converse and the upbeat revision differ fundamentally and consistently in their conclusions about citizens' capabilities. The downbeat and really downbeat revisions differ in their conclusions about the existence of true political attitudes among the politically astute. The upbeat revision takes political attitudes for granted while the really downbeat revision asserts that such attitudes do not exist. There are other inconsistencies.

Do these conflicts and contradictions reflect a truly schizophrenic literature, or are they no more than the kinds of across-study differences that every field experiences? The remainder of this section takes a closer look at selected contradictions to determine how they arose and how deeply they go. To anticipate: it looks like schizophrenia to us.

Converse's twin conclusions that few citizens understand political ideology and few hold true attitudes serve as natural starting points. An implication follows from each conclusion. The lack-of-ideological-understanding conclusion produces the following implication and its corollary:

> *Scholars should rarely and cautiously use closed-ended measures of ideology in their analyses. They will likely interpret statistically significant relationships between such measures and other measures of interest as applying to all of their respondents when in fact the relationships probably arise from multiple causal processes. The posited effects of ideology will hold for a small, genuinely ideological set of the sample, while the ideology measure is, for the remaining respondents, a noisy reading of something distinct from ideological understanding that is also related to vote or policy preference.*

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Similarly, since Converse demonstrated a lack of issue stability among Americans in two different studies and on a wide range of issues, the working assumption must be (p. 57) that, except on a few moral issues, most people do not hold true political attitudes. Thus the second implication and its corollary:

> *Unless scholars demonstrate, with panel data, that people hold stable and thus real attitudes, they should rarely and cautiously use cross-sectional attitude measures in their analyses. They will likely interpret statistically significant relationships between such measures and other measures of interest as indicating that all of their respondents hold true attitudes when in fact only a small percentage do. For the remainder, the attitude measures are a noisy reading of something distinct from true attitudes that is also related to the other measures of interest.*

Finally, Converse (1990, 2000) has often decried the large percentages who do not answer the survey items. From his perspective, this group is not solely a nuisance to be cast aside as quickly as possible; it comprises an important part of the story about the nature of public opinion in American politics. Thus a third implication:

> *If scholars seek a balanced and not overly-optimistic judgment about the nature of public opinion, they must take non-respondents into account.*[14]

If Converse reached the right conclusions, and we derived the right implications, then many of the studies included in the upbeat version begin to look problematic. Students of public opinion routinely use the closed-ended, seven-point ideology scales that the ANES inserted after Converse first wrote. The scales run from extremely liberal to extremely conservative. In any American National Election Study, somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of the survey respondents fail to answer the question (a point to which we return below). This leaves 70 to 80 percent who do answer it. But if Converse's original 12 percent estimate of those who understand left–right ideology is about right, then one conclusion follows: somewhere between 58 percent (70 percent−12 percent) and 68 percent (80 percent−12 percent) of ANES respondents answer the closed-ended ideology questions without understanding ideology itself.

In turn, conclusions that ideologies drive candidate evaluations, such as Levitin and Miller's, take on a mysterious quality. Precisely what do the significant regression coefficients represent? Do they indicate that *all*, or at least *most*, of the respondents draw on their ideologies? That is the conclusion researchers normally draw. However, it does not comport with Converse's original portrayal of American citizens.

In 1985, Knight replicated Converse's open-ended analysis using the 1980 ANES. She found essentially the same distribution that Converse found, although ideologues, defined to include Converse's ideologues and near-ideologues, now comprised 22 percent of the sample. They were better educated, more interested in politics, and more politically knowledgeable than others. Even more telling, Knight then analyzed candidate evaluation as a function of partisan identification, ideological self-label, and a set of issue

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preferences within each of Converse's four groups (ideologue, group benefit, nature of the times, and no issue content). Her finding could not have been stronger: only among Converse's ideologues did ideological self-label, as (p. 58) measured by the seven-point scale, shape presidential candidate evaluations; and among this group, self-proclaimed ideology packed a wallop. Among the other groups, it failed to reach statistical significance. Knight concludes that “the effects of ideology are qualitatively different among (Converse's) ideologues, and do not penetrate far beyond this level.… The ideology glass is…brimming among ideologues and nearly empty among all other citizens” (1985, 851). In other words, her findings imply that a small percentage of all respondents produced the relationship between self-described ideologies and candidate evaluations that Levitin and Miller reported. For the remainder, it reflects something other than a true ideological connection.

In fairness, Levitin and Miller cite Converse's findings early in their article, acknowledging the controversy over the “appropriateness of the criteria and the methods used to define and measure the prevalence of ideological thought” (1979, 751). They proceed to use the closed-ended measure nevertheless, on the grounds that they construe ideology much like partisan identification: as a filter or predisposition on which people can draw, perhaps, in many cases, without understanding what it really means. By defining political ideology as a predisposition and not as understanding, Miller and Levitin consciously distinguish their conception from of Converse's. But notice that the literature now suffers from an equally serious problem: the use of an identical label, political ideology, to represent different ideas. The tradeoff hardly represents intellectual progress.

What, then, about cross-sectional measures of political attitudes? From Converse's perspective, cross-sectional data cannot distinguish real from not-real attitudes. Nevertheless, scholars use cross-sectional measures, anyway. In other words, these studies assume precisely what Converse's analysis of attitude stability implies they could not assume: one-time responses represent true attitudes.

Consider a concrete cross-sectional item: government guarantee of a job. Converse and Markus (1979) uncovered considerable attitude instability on it. Most people, apparently, do not hold true attitudes about job guarantees. Nevertheless, Kinder and Winter (2001), in a study we noted earlier, use this and other cross-sectional attitude items to explore the black–white divide on racial and social welfare issues. They identified significant attitudinal differences across the two races on most of the items, including government job guarantee. So did Converse and Markus overstate the attitude instability on this item? Did pure chance work in Kinder and Winter's favor?[15] The choice is clear: Converse and Markus are right, in which case Kinder and Winter should justify their use of the government guarantee item, or Converse (and Markus) is wrong, in which case someone must present evidence in support of the claim. Pending a resolution, the term schizophrenia does not grossly misrepresent the current state of affairs.

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Note that Levitin and Miller report the number of missing cases, while Kinder and Winter do not. The latter authors, unfortunately, not the former, represent current (p. 59) practice. Substantively, neither study acknowledges these missing cases when reaching a final verdict about citizen performance. From Converse's perspective, this omission seriously distorts the story.

But could Converse have overstated his conclusions? Or do his conclusions no longer apply with the same force they did in 1964? Scholars have suggested both possibilities. A decade after Converse wrote, Marcus, Tabb, and Sullivan (1974) argued that open-ended questions measure verbal skills more than they measure political understanding; and that measures of issue constraint ignore individual rationales that would justify the low constraint. Moreover, Converse imposed a very high standard. For example, he categorized people who discussed liberal and conservative in spend-save terms as not really understanding left–right ideology. Yet political observers frequently portray ideological politics in these very terms. No one, furthermore, has convincingly argued that open-ended questions more validly measure political understanding than closed-ended questions. Not surprising, the latter reveal a more fully informed citizenry (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). Finally, Kinder (2003) argues that relatively many people now hold true attitudes, especially on burning social issues. Converse and Marcus (1979) themselves reported evidence supporting Kinder's claim. Today's world does not resemble the world of the early 1960s.

Overall, however, different research choices seem to explain the divergence of Converse and the upbeat revision. These include: the use of open-ended versus closed-ended questions; different interpretations of positive associations between ideological self-labels and other variables of interest; assumptions about the validity and meaning of cross-sectional attitude measures; and the incorporation of non-responses into the final story about citizen performance. That Converse wrote first, of course, does not make him right. To date, however, those who have contributed to the upbeat revision have not yet fully confronted these differences and then justified their practices.

Similar contradictions appear when comparing Converse with the really downbeat version, represented by Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992) and, later, Bartels' elaboration. Recall that ideological orientation and attitude change, along with political awareness, form the core of Zaller's top-of-the-head model of the survey response. That ideological orientation serves as a key component of Zaller's model immediately raises the possibility that his research violates two of the implications identified above: scholars should rarely and cautiously use closed-ended measures of ideology and they should take missing data into account when reaching their final portrayals (especially given the large number of missing cases on the ideology measures). That he used cross-sectional attitude measures raises the possibility that Zaller also violated the third implication: scholars should rarely and cautiously use cross-sectional measures of attitude. On the other hand, Zaller developed his model and conducted his empirical analysis with the utmost care, and constantly with an eye on Converse.

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Lamenting the lack of domain–specific measures of political values, Zaller makes a case for using measures of general left–right orientations (1992, 27). Operationally, these measures tap people's predispositions to accept or resist the political communications they receive from their environments. In Zaller's words: (p. 60)

> At some points in this study I will describe individuals as "liberal" or "conservative." In so doing, I will *never* (his emphasis) mean to imply that the people so designated are necessarily full-fledged, doctrinaire ideologues of the left or right. I will mean only that the people tend to be closer to one or the other pole of the constellation of associated liberal-conservative values. (Ideology is an indicator) of *predispositions* (his emphasis) to accept or reject particular political communications. (1992, 27–8)

Zaller could not be more explicit about his conception of ideology, which echoes Levitin and Miller's.
He measures left–right orientations in various ways, depending on data availability. Sometimes he includes the seven-point ideology item, sometimes not. Often he uses cross-sectional attitude measures—attitudes toward government services and government job guarantees, for example. These are among the very items on which Converse and Markus (1979) found people to lack true attitudes. Most intriguing, Zaller measures people's 1956 ideological orientations by constructing domestic and foreign policy scales. Some of the items comprising the scales are those Converse originally used to show a lack of issue constraint!

Zaller, like just about every scholar who uses responses to closed-ended questions, also violates the third implication. Although he diligently reports the number of cases, he does not given the proportion of respondents who were excluded from the analyses because they failed to answer one or more questions. Nor does he consider the implications of the missing cases, which approach 30 percent on occasions, for his overall story. In other words, he reaches his conclusions using only part of the data base that Converse uses.

To be clear: we are not criticizing Zaller's outstanding work. Many we included view *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* as the most important statement on public opinion since Converse himself. But this only underlines the depth of the schizophrenia. In taking Converse to new heights, Zaller, of all authors, appears to violate all three implications of his work!

Finally, the downbeat and really downbeat revisions both portray citizens in a darker light than Converse did, and yet offer diametrically opposed views of Converse's ideologues and near-ideologues. In the downbeat version, these citizens dig their heels in the ground and tenaciously protect their existing political beliefs and attitudes. Political attitudes are not only real; they are, for the most part, immovable. But in the really downbeat version, these same individuals do not hold true attitudes.[16] That is because their expressed attitudes at any point in time reflect the considerations that recent political debate and

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discussion bring to mind. To be sure, these politically knowledgeable people do not form their attitudes randomly, but this is a far cry from holding rock-solid attitudes.

This contradiction, one of the most striking, might not be as severe as it appears. Sniderman, Tetlock, and Elms (2001) find that political attitudes depend on a combination of political predispositions and particular situations. In their “probable (p. 61) cause” experiment, for example, they find that both self-labeled liberals and conservatives call a police search for drugs more reasonable when told the suspects were using bad language than when told they were well dressed. This is the situational component. Across both situations, liberals take a more lenient position than conservatives. This is the pre-dispositional component. And thus the conclusion: although contextual changes can cause attitudes to look unstable, it is a big leap to call them meaningless, as the pre-dispositional component shows. Whether Sniderman et al. fully reconcile the downbeat and really-downbeat revisions is debatable. They do offer hope of reconciling at least some of the contradictions.

The term schizophrenic, as applied to human beings, refers to an extreme personality disorder. Does public opinion research suffer an equivalent disorder? Unfortunately, in our view, it does. Mounting additional empirical studies will probably exacerbate, not eliminate the problem. Perhaps it is time to pause and take stock of the enterprise.

6 Concluding Comment

This chapter began with the observation that political scientists have been able to tell a coherent story about citizens and public opinion. That story came directly and fully from Converse. In light of the three revisions, however, this observation no longer holds. As inevitably happens following the publication of a simple, profound, and generally crystal-clear statement on a scholarly topic, subsequent work muddied the waters. Simple became complicated; subtle changes in concept definition and measurement accumulated into increasingly larger departures from the original ideas; and scholars changed the criteria by which to judge citizen performance. An abundance of riches generated by forty years of additional research has, ironically, led from crystal-clear to schizophrenic. Crystal-clear does not mean right, just as schizophrenic does not imply wasted efforts. At this very moment, however, students of public opinion could not tell the proverbial person on the street a simple and comprehensible story about citizens and public opinion. Unless, that is, they want to say, simply, that most people don't understand the contours of politics and most don't hold true political attitudes. Life was much easier when there was only Converse!

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Notes:

(1) For example, we paid little attention to publication chronology when identifying the three revisions.

(2) Converse used the 1956 wave of the panel study for this analysis.

(3) The researchers asked this question to separate those who did not see a difference from those who saw a difference but cynically believed it was meaningless.

(4) A sizeable number of respondents correctly identified Republicans as more conservative than Democrats and then, when asked what they meant, spoke largely in spend-save terms. Converse distinguishes them from those who gave answers comparable to the ones his ideologues and near-ideologues gave in the 1956 wave.

(5) Achen (1975) and Erikson (1979) raise important measurement concerns that we do not pursue here.

(6) Only Converse knows for sure, but finding an almost complete lack of attitude consistency within the context of existing psychological research probably surprised him.

(7) Related evidence comes from Luskin and Fishkin's research on deliberative polls (1998). They found that deliberations effected attitude change among participants. Follow-up surveys conducted several weeks after the deliberations found that most people, and certainly the politically knowledgeable, returned to their original policy positions, even though they continued to know more than they did before the experience.

(8) In a word, people experience ambivalence, a concept that Hochschild (1981) first introduced in her study of citizens' attitudes toward equality. Hochschild conducted lengthy open-ended interviews with 28 individuals to uncover the ambivalence. Other studies of political ambivalence, all based on survey data, include Alvarez and Brehm (2002), Basinger and Levine (2005), Grant and Rudolph (2003), Lavine and Steenbergen (2005), and Rudolph (2005). None of these authors goes as far as Zaller to derive the

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implications of ambivalence for the nature and role of public opinion in democratic societies. On the other hand, Zaller, unlike others, does not view ambivalence in terms of value or attitude conflict. We thank Tom Rudolph for this astute observation.

(9) Note how this conclusion, which is derived from survey data, conflicts with Taber and Lodge's experimental studies of motivation and attitude maintenance, which we cited earlier (also see Bartels 2000). We will return to this conflict, as well as to others, in the next section.

(10) A third value, support for the free enterprise system, had no effect.

(11) Despite its importance to the public opinion literature, we do not discuss the use of political heuristics. That research asks how citizens can make reasonable decisions even when they lack information (Brady and Sniderman 1985; Mondak 1993*a*, 1993*b*; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991; Mutz 1998). This chapter focuses more narrowly on what citizens know (or don't know) and how they use whatever knowledge they possess. We also skip the collective opinion literature (MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989 and Nardulli 2005), some of which finds salvation in aggregation (Page and Shapiro 1982; but see Althaus 1998).

(12) This finding appears to contradict Delli Carpini and Keeter's, which we cited earlier.

(13) In a replication of the Gordon and Segura study, Peyton (2006) uses hierarchical linear modeling to show that system- and individual-level characteristics interact. For example, some system characteristics reduce the information gap between the more and less educated.

(14) Converse has never stated these implications, which are ours alone, and he might not agree with them.

(15) Quite possibly the authors justified their neglect of Converse and Markus in their own minds, but they never explicated the reasoning. Probably three-quarters of all public opinion studies conducted over the past 40 years resemble Kinder and Winter. We could have chosen any one of them, although Kinder serves a useful purpose: he is one of the leading public opinion scholars in political science who has often praised the quality of Converse's work.

(16) We do not distinguish between attitudes and preferences, even though Bartels' argument centers on that distinction. We try, nevertheless, to be true to the spirit of his argument, which is to say that we equate attitudes with Bartels' preferences.

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