

System Error Lecture I

Cognitive Error: How Elite Cues, Social Media, and Psychology Disrupt Democracy

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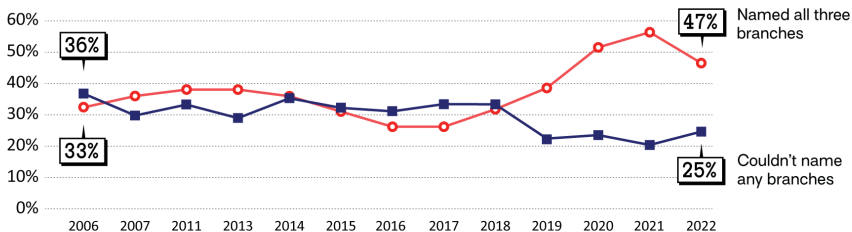
Outline

- ① Knowledge
Political Knowledge and the Democratic Dilemma
- ② Elite Cues
The Psychology of Elite Cues
- ③ Technology
Social Media and Public Opinion
- ④ Democracy Threatened
Technology's Threat to Democracy
- ⑤ What Can We Do?
Improving the Relationship Between Democracy and Technology

The Normative View of Democratic Citizens

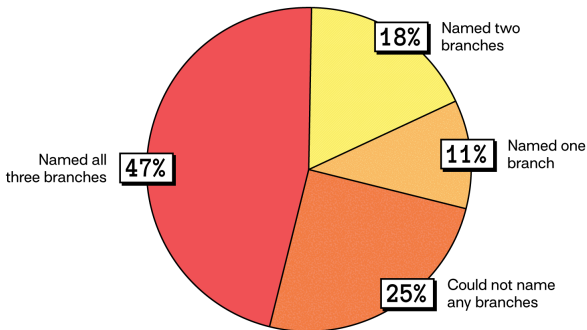
- “The Democratic Citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, and what the consequences are”
[Berelson et al., 1954, p. 308]

Percentage of people who can name the three branches of government



Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 2-13, 2022, and prior years
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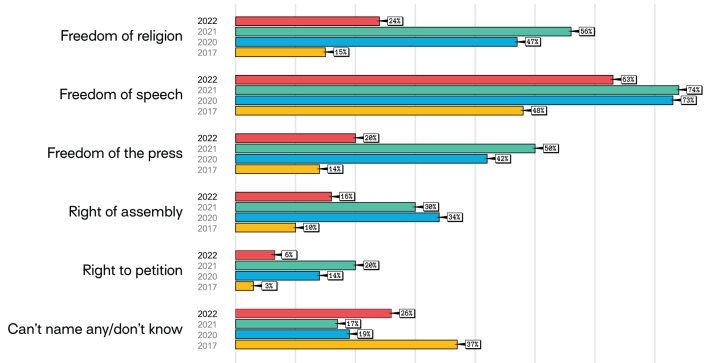
Percentage of people who can name the three branches of government



Total does not equal 100% due to rounding.

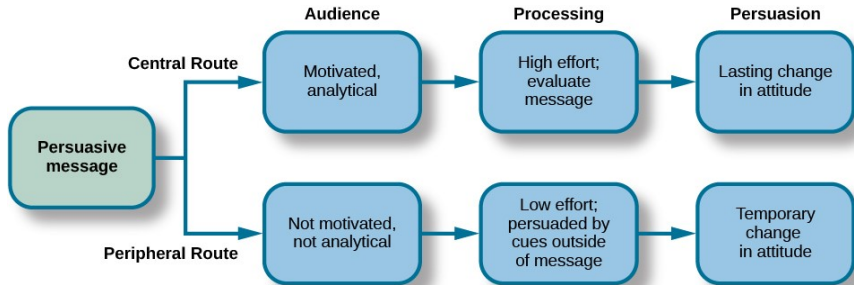
Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 2-13, 2022
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Percentage of respondents who can name rights guaranteed by the First Amendment



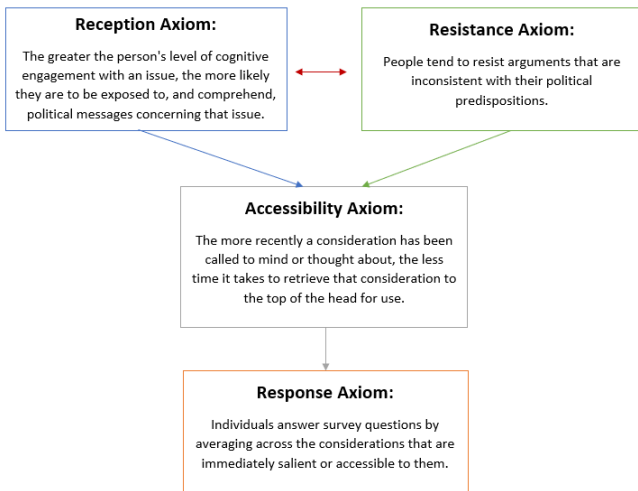
Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 2-13, 2022, and prior years
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The Elaboration Likelihood Model of Persuasion



[Petty and Cacioppo, 1986]

Receive, Accept, Sample (RAS) Model [Zaller, 1992]



Theoretical Dynamic [Druckman et al., 2013]

- **Frames** are alternative conceptualizations of an issue or event, which emphasize specific considerations.
 - Opinion is influenced more by strong (more convincing) frames, generally; →
 - In non-polarized environments, partisanship matters (additional consideration), but strong frames matter more; →
 - **Polarization** of an issue area amplifies receptivity to in-party frames, regardless of strength, and increases confidence in one's opinion.

Empirical Dynamic [Druckman et al., 2013]

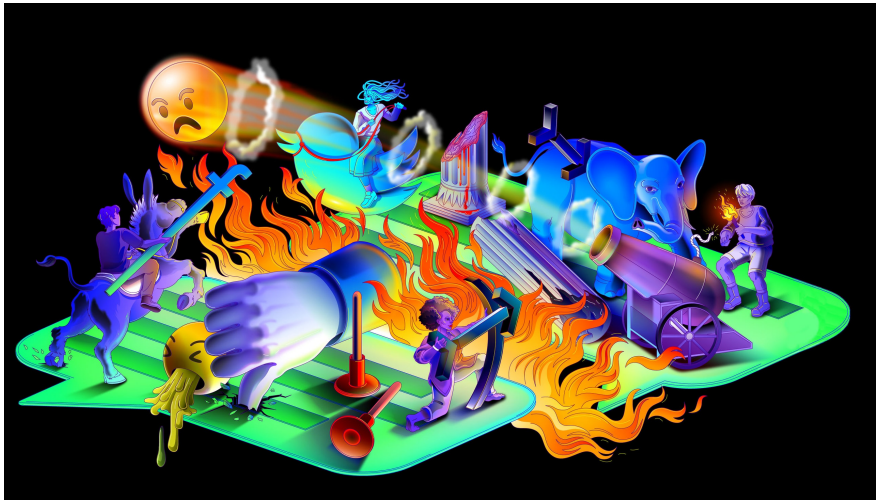
- **Experimental Tests** - Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors (DREAM) Act and Oil Drilling:
 - In the absence of party endorsements strong frames move all participants.
 - When the parties offer equally strong frames, participants are moved by their party's message and partisan cues take on importance.
 - When the policy area is polarized, *motivated reasoning* dominates, and even weak frames from trusted partisans strongly move opinions, and increase confidence in these opinions.

Elite Cues and Expert Opinion

- Predict disagreement with expert opinion [[Darmofal, 2005](#)], especially for low knowledge individuals.
- Expert information becomes significantly less likely to move public opinion when polarization is high and the public is not already aligned with expert opinion [[Guisinger and Saunders, 2017](#)].
- Knowing an issue is polarized increases support for bipartisanship, but ultimately fails to move public opinion [[Robison and Mullinix, 2016](#)].
- Polarization also decreases trust, interest, and efficacy in *independents* when polarization is salient.

Massive Literature on a Range of Issues!

- Once an issue has become polarized, elites have staked out an opinion, and these messages flow through media, partisan elite cues become a primary predictor of public opinion:
 - Foreign policy issues such as trade and nuclear proliferation [Guisinger and Saunders, 2017].
 - Climate change [Carmichael and Brulle, 2017].
 - COVID-19 [Abbas, 2022, Bolsen and Palm, 2022, Chen and Karim, 2021].
 - Transgender Rights [Jones and Brewer, 2020].
 - “Star Wars” Missile Defense [Darmofal, 2005].
 - European Integration [Gabel and Scheve, 2007].



The New Yorker [Lewis-Kraus, 2022]

Technology and Cognitive Processes

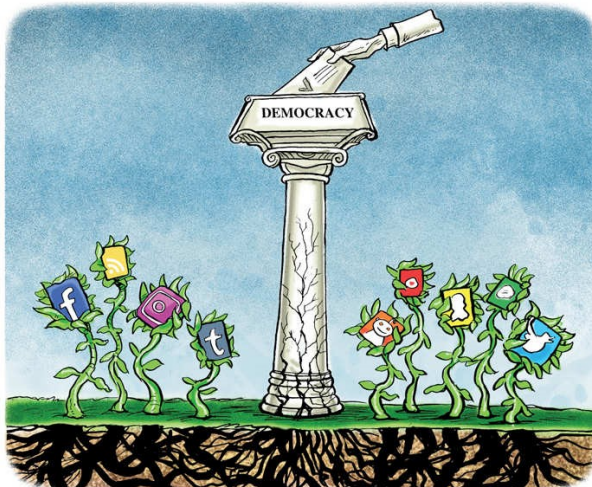
- Motivated Reasoning [Gaines et al., 2007].
 - Seek out information that confirms prior belief, view that evidence as stronger, and dismiss contradictory evidence regardless of objective accuracy [Druckman et al., 2013].
- Selective Exposure and “Echo Chambers” (Not Quite?):
 - Confirmation Bias [Nickerson, 1998].
 - Availability Bias [Tversky and Kahneman, 1973].
 - “News-Finds-Me” Perception [Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020].
- Selective Perception [Jacobson, 2010, Gaines et al., 2007].
- Elite Polarization and Conflict Extension [Carmines and Stimson, 1989, Abramowitz, 2011].
- Social Media, Traditional Mass Media, and Viral Content [Tucker et al., 2018].

The Consequences of Social Media

- Affective Partisanship (Negative Partisanship), Social Sorting, and diminished cross-pressures [Mason, 2018].
 - Exposure to opposing views on social media can increase political polarization [Bail et al., 2018]!
 - Increased out-party animus altered COVID-19 mitigation behaviors [Druckman et al., 2021].
- Fake News, Misinformation, and Disinformation [Vosoughi et al., 2018].
- The “Endorsement Heuristic” - information and source credibility are enhanced by increased sharing/virality [Tucker et al., 2018].
- The “Realism Heuristic” - audiovisual content resembles the real world more than text [Tucker et al., 2018].

The Role of Human Emotion

- Emotion inducing elite cues (Anger/Anxiety/Enthusiasm) increase hostile media perceptions [Weeks et al., 2019].
- Political content with high emotional context (positive/negative) increase shares on social media [Weismueller et al., 2022, Goldenberg et al., 2018].
- Out-group animosity (we are tribal!) drives social media engagement [Rathje et al., 2021].
- **Algorithmic Radicalization?**



[Omidyar, 2017]

**Donald J. Trump** ✓

@realDonaldTrump



States want to correct their votes, which they now know were based on irregularities and fraud, plus corrupt process never received legislative approval. All Mike Pence has to do is send them back to the States, AND WE WIN. Do it Mike, this is a time for extreme courage!

⚠ **This claim about election fraud is disputed**

1:17 PM · Jan 6, 2021



213.5K



85.8K people are Tweeting about this

Maybe This is Overstated?

- The research is mixed and many of the findings are correlational [[Haidt and Bail, Ongoing](#)].
- The causal arrow may be in the wrong direction.
- Studies with causal inference models [[Allcott et al., 2020](#), [Asimovic et al., 2021](#)] show marginal and mixed results.
- Influence of “echo chambers” and “algorithmic radicalization” strongest for the most ideologically extreme.

Democracy Threatened? Social Capital

- “Why the Past 10 Years of American Life Have Been Uniquely Stupid” [Haidt, 2022].
- Diminishing Social Capital and Trust.
 - Small number of aggressive partisans attacking a large number of victims including within-group dissenters.
 - The rise of “Cancel Culture.”
 - Pushing out the nuance, and turning off the moderates [Bor and Petersen, 2022].

Democracy Threatened? Attack on Institutions

- An Attack on American Institutions.
 - “Fake News,” Elite cues, and the erosion of *trust in elections*.
 - **Source credibility/trust** are most important for what information users trust online [Sterrett et al., 2019].
- Insurrection of January 6, 2021.

Democracy Threatened? Cracking Our Shared Reality

- Shared Reality.
 - Disinformation, Motivated Reasoning, and a New Reality.
 - Civil Discourse or talking past each other?
 - Compromise under these conditions?

Democratic Reforms

- Reduce the institutionally large influence of extremists:
 - Single, nonpartisan, open primary, with **Ranked Choice Voting** (Rep. Liz Cheney vs. Sen. Lisa Murkowski).
 - Eliminate Gerrymandering.
 - Campaign finance reform (e.g., Super PACs and *Citizens United*).

Business Reforms

- Joseph Stieglitz once compared the business elite to “a dieter who would rather do anything to lose weight than actually eat less.”
 - Democracy must demand oversight (e.g., the de-funded Office of Technology Assessment) [Reich et al., 2022].
 - “Adaptive Regulation.”
- Sharing reform not censorship - break/slow the *virality chain*.
- Greater transparency in social media algorithms and data.
- Change the Children's Online Privacy Act to set the age of “internet adulthood” to 16, rather than 13 [Haidt, 2022].

Questions?



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