position either to win, or especially to block, approval of ballot measures. Sometimes a recall campaign is mounted for unfair reasons, and recall campaigns can stir up unnecessary and undesirable conflict in a community. Most of these criticisms can also be leveled at our more traditional institutions. Courts sometimes err, as in the *Dred Scott* decision and in *Plessy v. Ferguson* or *Korematsu*. Presidents surely make mistakes (FDR's attempt to pack the Supreme Court, 1937; Kennedy's Bay of Pigs fiasco, 1961; Nixon's involvement in the Watergate break-in and subsequent coverup, 1972–1974; Reagan's involvement in the Iran–contra arms deal, 1986). And legislatures not only make mistakes about policy from time to time but wind up spending nearly a third of their time amending, changing, and correcting past legislation that proved inadequate or wrong. In short, we pay a price for believing in and practicing democracy—whatever the form.

Whatever the shortcomings of direct democracy, and there are several, they do not justify the elimination of the populist devices from those state constitutions permitting them. Moreover, any suggestion to repeal the initiative, referendum, and recall would be defeated by the voters. Public opinion strongly supports retaining these devices where they are allowed.

In sum, direct democracy devices have not been a cure-all for most political, social, or economic ills, yet they have been an occasional remedy, and generally a moderate remedy, for legislative lethargy and the misuse and nonuse of legislative power. It was long feared that these devices would dull legislators' sense of responsibility without in fact quickening the people to the exercise of any real control in public affairs. Little evidence exists for those fears today. When popular demands for reasonable change are repeatedly ignored by elected officials and when legislators or other officials ignore valid interests and criticism, the initiative, referendum, and recall can be a means by which the people may protect themselves in the grand tradition of self-government.

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LAWRENCE JACOBS
ROBERT SHAPIRO

From *Politicians Don't Pander*

Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro challenge the premise popular in the 1990s that politicians cater to what the public wants: a finger in the wind of public opinion makes policy. No, they find, politicians don't pander. In fact, the authors suggest that the opposite is true. More often, politicians ignore what the mainstream of the public wants, attempting instead to create a version of public opinion that accords with the politicians' views. Media coverage aids in this upside down relationship between the people and their representatives. The end result is that the American people do not believe that the government reflects their views; they do not trust their leaders. To Jacobs and Shapiro, the question of how much public opinion truly shapes policy lies at the heart of American democracy.

THE WAY CONGRESS HANDLED the impeachment of President Bill Clinton revealed a lot about American politics. Commentators and the American public were visibly struck by the unyielding drive of congressional Republicans to remove Clinton from office in the face of clear public opposition. The Republicans' disregard for the preferences of the great majority of Americans contradicted perhaps the most widely accepted presumption about politics—that politicians slavishly follow public opinion.

There was little ambiguity about where Americans stood on Clinton's personal behavior and impeachment. The avalanche of opinion polls during 1998 and early 1999 showed that super-majorities of nearly two-thirds of Americans condemned the president's personal misdeeds, but about the same number approved his job performance, opposed his impeachment and removal from office, and favored a legislative censure as an appropriate alternative punishment.

Despite Americans' strong and unchanging opinions, congressional Republicans defied the public at almost every turn. Beginning in the fall of 1998, the Republican-led House of Representatives initiated impeachment proceedings; its Judiciary Committee reported impeachment

articles; and it passed two articles of impeachment on the House floor. Neither the House nor the Senate allowed a vote on the option supported by the public—censure. For all the civility in the Senate trial of the president on the House-passed articles of impeachment, the Republicans' pursuit of Clinton was checked not by a sudden attentiveness to public opinion but rather by the constitutional requirement of a two-thirds vote and the bipartisan support that this demanded.

The impeachment spectacle reveals one of the most important developments in contemporary American politics—the widening gulf between politicians' policy decisions and the preferences of the American people toward specific issues. The impeachment of Clinton can be added to the long list of policies that failed to mirror public opinion: campaign finance reform, tobacco legislation, Clinton's proposals in his first budget for an energy levy and a high tax on Social Security benefits (despite his campaign promises to cut middle-class taxes), the North American Free Trade Agreement (at its outset), U.S. intervention in Bosnia, as well as House Republican proposals after the 1994 elections for a "revolution" in policies toward the environment, education, Medicare, and other issues.

Recent research . . . provides evidence that this list is not a quirk of recent political developments but part of a trend of declining responsiveness to the public's policy preferences. The conventional wisdom that politicians habitually respond to public opinion when making major policy decisions is wrong. . . .

The Republicans' handling of impeachment fits into a larger pattern in contemporary American politics. . . .

. . . First, Republicans disregarded public opinion on impeachment because their political goals of attracting a majority of voters was offset by their policy goals of enacting legislation that politicians and their supporters favored. The ideological polarization of congressional Republicans and Democrats since the mid-1970s, the greater institutional independence of individual lawmakers, and other factors have raised the political benefits of pursuing policy goals that they and their party's activists desire. Responding to public opinion at the expense of policy goals entailed compromising their own philosophical convictions and risked alienating ideologically extreme party activists and other supporters who volunteer and contribute money to their primary and general election campaigns. Only the heat of an imminent presidential election and the elevated attention that average voters devote to it motivate contemporary politicians to respond to public opinion and absorb the costs of compromising their policy goals.

Indeed, the Republicans' relentless pursuit of impeachment was largely driven by the priority that the domineering conservative wing of the party attached to their policy goal (removing Clinton) over their political goals (appealing to a majority of Americans). Moderate Republicans could not ignore the risk of opposing impeachment—it could lead to a challenge in the next primary election and diminished campaign contributions.

Our second point is that politicians pursue a strategy of *crafted talk* to change public opinion in order to offset the potential political costs of not following the preferences of average voters. Politicians track public opinion not to make policy but rather to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters favor. Politicians want the best of both worlds: to enact their preferred policies and to be reelected.

While politicians devote their resources to changing public opinion, their actual influence is a more complex story. Politicians themselves attempt to change public opinion not by directly persuading the public on the merits of their policy choices but by "priming" public opinion: they "stay on message" to highlight standards or considerations for the public to use in evaluating policy proposals. Republicans, for example, emphasized "big government" to prompt the public to think about its uneasiness about government. Politicians' efforts to sway the public are most likely to influence the perceptions, understandings, and evaluations of specific policy proposals such as Republican proposals in 1995 to significantly reduce spending on Medicare to fund a tax cut. But even here, politicians' messages promoting their policy proposals often provoke new or competing messages from their political opponents and the press that complicate or stymie their efforts to move public opinion. In addition, efforts to influence the public's evaluations of specific proposals are unlikely to affect people's values and fundamental preferences (such as those underlying support for Medicare, Social Security, and other well-established programs). We distinguish, then, between political leaders' attempts to alter the public's perceptions, evaluations, and choices concerning very specific proposals (which are susceptible but not certain to change) and Americans' values and long-term preferences (which tend to be stable and particularly resistant to short-term manipulation). In short, politicians' confidence in their ability to move public opinion by crafting their statements and actions boosts their willingness to discount majority opinion; but the reality is that efforts to change public opinion are difficult and are often most successful when deployed against major new policy proposals by the opposition, which has the more modest task of increasing the public's uncertainty and anxiety to avoid risk.

Politicians respond to public opinion, then, but in two quite different ways. In one, politicians assemble information on public opinion to design government policy. This is usually equated with "pandering," and this is most evident during the relatively short period when presidential elections are imminent. The use of public opinion research here, however, raises a troubling question: why has the derogatory term "pander" been pinned on politicians who respond to public opinion? The answer is revealing: the term is deliberately deployed by politicians, pundits, and other elites to belittle government responsiveness to public opinion and reflects a long-standing fear, uneasiness, and hostility among elites toward popular consent and influence over the affairs of government. It is surely odd in a democracy to consider responsiveness to public opinion as disreputable. We challenge the stigmatizing use of the term "pandering" and adopt the neutral concept of "political responsiveness." We suggest that the public's preferences offer both broad directions to policymakers (e.g., establish universal health insurance) and some specific instructions (e.g., rely on an employer mandate for financing reform). In general, policymakers should follow these preferences.

Politicians respond to public opinion in a second manner—they use research on public opinion to pinpoint the most alluring words, symbols, and arguments in an attempt to move public opinion to support their desired policies. Public opinion research is used by politicians to manipulate public opinion, that is, to move Americans to "hold opinions that they would not hold if aware of the best available information and analysis. . . ." Their objective is to *simulate responsiveness*. Their words and presentations are crafted to change public opinion and create the *appearance* of responsiveness as they pursue their desired policy goals. Intent on lowering the potential electoral costs of subordinating voters' preferences to their policy goals, politicians use polls and focus groups not to move their positions closer to the public's but just the opposite: to find the most effective means *to move public opinion closer to their own desired policies.*

Political consultants as diverse as Republican pollster Frank Luntz and Clinton pollster Dick Morris readily confess that legislators and the White House "don't use a poll to reshape a program, but to reshape your argumentation for the program so that the public supports it." Indeed, Republicans' dogged pursuit of impeachment was premised on the assumption that poll-honed presentations would ultimately win public support for their actions. We suggest that this kind of overconfidence in the power of crafted talk to move public opinion explains the political overreaching and failure that was vividly displayed by Clinton's health reform effort during the 1993–94 period and the Republicans' campaign for their

policy objectives beginning with their "Contract with America" during 1995–96. Crafted talk has been more effective in opposing rather than promoting policy initiatives partly because the news media represent and magnify disagreement but also because politicians' overconfidence in crafted talk has prompted them to promote policy goals that do not enjoy the support of most Americans or moderate legislators.

Our argument flips the widespread image of politicians as "pandering" to public opinion on its head. Public opinion is not propelling policy decisions as it did in the past. Instead, politicians' own policy goals are increasingly driving major policy decisions and public opinion research, which is used to identify the language, symbols, and arguments to "win" public support for their policy objectives. Responsiveness to public opinion and manipulation of public opinion are not mutually exclusive: politicians manipulate public opinion by tracking public thinking to select the actions and words that resonate with the public.

Our third point is that politicians' muted responsiveness to public opinion and crafting of their words and actions has a profound impact on the mass media and on public opinion itself. In contrast to others who emphasize the nearly unlimited independence and power of the mass media, we argue that press coverage of national politics has been driven by the polarization of politicians and their reliance on crafting their words and deeds. The press focuses on political conflict and strategy because these are visible and genuine features of contemporary American politics. The combination of politicians' staged displays and the media's scrutiny of the motives behind them produced public distrust and fear of major government reform efforts. We do not treat policymaking, media coverage, and public opinion as parts that can be studied one at a time; rather, we study their dynamic configurations and processes of interdependence. Democratic governance and the process of public communications are inseparably linked. . . .

We argue that politicians' pursuits of policy goals have created a reinforcing spiral or cycle that encompasses media coverage and public opinion. It is characterized by three features. First, the polarization of Washington political elites and their strategies to manipulate the media and gain public support have prompted the press to increasingly emphasize or frame its coverage in terms of political conflict and strategy at the expense of the substance of policy issues and problems. Although news reports largely represent the genuine contours of American politics, the media's organizational, financial, and professional incentives prompt them to exaggerate the degree of conflict in order to produce simple, captivating stories for their audiences.

Second, the increased political polarization and politicians' strategy of crafting what they say and do (as conveyed through press coverage) raise the probability of both changes in public understandings and evaluations of specific policy proposals, and public perceptions that proposals for policy change make uncertain or threaten the personal well-being of individual Americans. The presence of a vocal political opposition, combined with the media's attentiveness to the ensuing conflict and the public's skittishness about change, often prevents reformers from changing public opinion as they intended.

Third, the cycle closes as the media's coverage and the public's reaction that was initially sparked by politicians' actions feed back into the political arena. How politicians appraise the media's coverage of their initial actions affects their future strategy and behavior. Politicians latch on to any evidence of changes in public opinion that are favorable to their positions in order to justify their policies and to increase the electoral risk of their rivals for opposing them. . . .

The public's perception that government officials do not listen to or care much about their views accelerated in the 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. Paralleling this trend, polls by Gallup, the Pew Center, and the Center on Policy Attitudes during the second half of the 1990s consistently found that large majorities doubted the founding premise of American government—popular sovereignty and consent of the governed. Over 60 percent of the public (according to responses to a diverse set of survey questions) believed that elected officials in Washington and members of Congress "lose touch" or are "out of touch with average Americans" and do not understand what "most Americans" or "people like you" think. . . .

Increasing political responsiveness to centrist opinion would not produce neutral changes in government policy but ones that can have profound political implications. Politicians who respond to public opinion would enact policies that defied today's calcified political categories of liberal and conservative. The public, on balance, is more conservative on social issues than Democrats; it is less liberal, for instance, toward homosexuality and criminal behavior. On the other hand, the public is supportive of proposals for political reforms and progressive economic, health, and environmental programs, which Republicans reject. More responsive government might well pursue more conservative social policies and more progressive economic and political ones.

The most important implication of raising responsiveness is to reaffirm the spirit and content of democracy in America. The continued slippage in government responsiveness threatens the foundation of our democratic

order and the meaning of rule by and for the people. Whether *democratic* government survives is not foreordained or guaranteed; it is the challenge of each generation to be vigilant and reassert its importance. Insisting that politicians follow the popular will and allow citizens to engage in unfettered public debate is central to that struggle.