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An excerpt from POLITICIANS DON'T PANDER
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Government Responsiveness in Decline

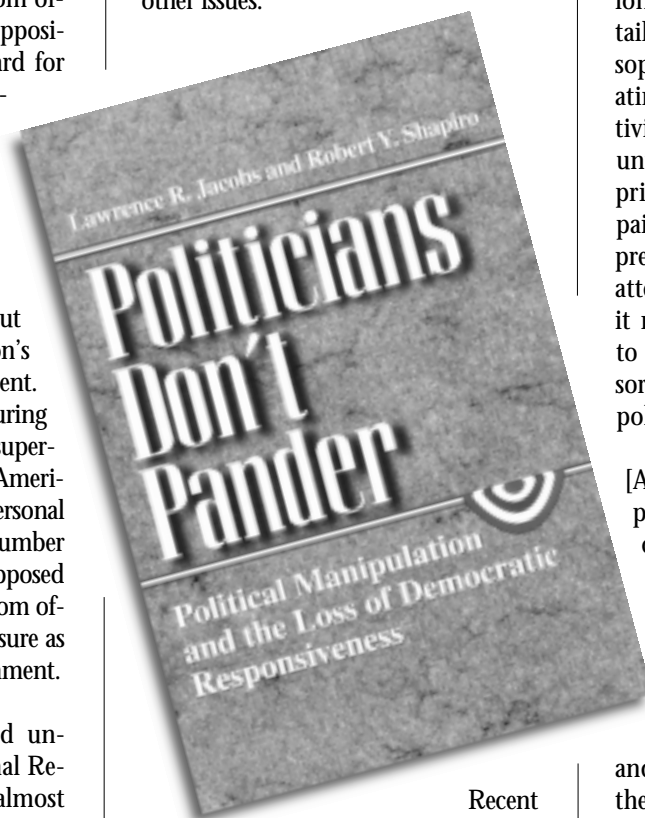
The way Congress handled the impeachment of President Bill Clinton revealed a lot about American politics. Commentators and the American public were visibly struck by the unyielding drive of congressional Republicans to remove Clinton from office in the face of clear public opposition. The Republicans' 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 supermajorities 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.... [Their] pursuit of Clinton was [finally] 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), US 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....

[A] 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....

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 produces 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 do *not* claim that polls, focus groups, and other indicators of public opinion play no important role in the policymaking process. Information about public opinion does play a role in the making of symbolic decisions (such as the location of presidential vacations), minor policy decisions (Clinton's proposal before the 1996 election for school uniforms), and some important policy decisions (raising the minimum wage in the summer of 1996). Our main point is that the influence of public opinion on government policy is *less* than it has been in the past and certainly less than commonly assumed by political pundits and some scholars. In addition, public opinion research in American politics does play a critical role in how politicians and other elites craft their actions and statements to elicit public support. Finally, politicians are not shy about brandishing polls that support their positions in order to justify and promote them further....

Does the American government respond to the broad public or to the interests and values of narrowly constituted groups committed to advancing

their private policy agendas? On one side lies democratic accountability; on the other a closed and insular govern-

“Politicians have worked hard to obscure their true positions and to distort the positions of their opponents.”

ment that is ill-suited to address the wishes or wants of most citizens. When politicians persistently disregard the public's policy preferences, popular sovereignty and representative democracy are threatened.

Can we rely on competitive elections to fend off muted responsiveness to centrist opinion? After all, congressional Democrats suffered stunning setbacks in the 1994 elections following Clinton's campaign for an unpopular health care reform plan and the Republicans' congressional majorities were reduced in the 1996 and 1998 elections after they pursued policies that defied strong public preferences. We argue that electoral punishment may not be enough to improve the public's influence on government: the responsiveness of national policymakers to what most Americans prefer has declined and remained low for almost two decades despite electoral setbacks to Democrats and Republicans. Politicians have worked hard to obscure their true positions and to distort the positions of their opponents, which makes it hard for the electorate to identify the policy positions of elected officials and to punish politicians for pursuing unpopular policies. In addition, most members of Congress today attach greater electoral importance to following the policy goals of party activists than responding to centrist opinion. The bottom line is that most politicians are keenly motivated and amply skilled at evading

electoral accountability for long periods. Their success has impaired our system of accountability and sullied the *quality* of citizenship by eroding public trust and fuelling the news media's increasing focus on political conflict and strategy rather than on the substantive issues raised by government policy.

Our analysis should not be confused, however, with naive populism. We recognize that the sheer complexity and scope of government decisions require elite initiative, at times without public guidance. And, on occasion, elites may need to defy ill-informed and unreasoned public opinion in defense of larger considerations and, instead, rely upon the public's *post hoc* evaluations of their actions and their arguments justifying their actions. Franklin Roosevelt's arming of merchant marines prior to the United States' entry into the Second World War and Richard Nixon's opening to China represent such cases.

What we see today in contemporary American politics, however, far exceeds responsible leadership in a representative democracy. What concerns us are indications of declining responsiveness to public opinion and the growing list of policies on which politicians of both major political parties ignore public opinion and supply no explicit justification for it. The practice of American government is drifting from the norms of democratic responsiveness.

From *Politicians Don't Pander: Political Manipulation and the Loss of Democratic Responsiveness*, winner of the Goldsmith Book Prize from Harvard University, the Richard E. Neustadt Award from the American Political Science Association, and the Distinguished Book Award in Political Sociology from the American Sociological Association. Reprinted by permission of the University of Chicago Press. Copyright ©2000 by the University of Chicago. All rights reserved.