Manipulating Democracy
Democratic Theory, Political Psychology, and Mass Media

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Consider some famous examples of political manipulation. I have chosen examples from other countries and times to give us the perspective of distance. Since manipulation is a negative and contentious term, it is worth stepping back from current partisan divisions in order to clarify the phenomenon.

In Britain, the 1924 Labour government of Ramsay Macdonald loses the election in part because of the publication of a fake letter from the Soviet head of the Comintern, Grigory Zinoviev. The Conservatives win with a red scare drum beat of fear that Labour is in league with the Soviets, who were in fact preaching continuous world revolution. In 1999, a British parliamentary inquiry opened up the historical issues, concluding that officials in the Foreign Office knew the letter was fake but were happy to see the Labour government discredited right before the election.

In the Australian election of 2001, John Howard and his government falsely claimed that a boatload of immigrants had thrown their children overboard in order to try and seek asylum in Australia. Howard used this to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and pull ahead of Labour in the polls just before the election. A later Senate inquiry in Australia determined that the Howard government knew that the allegations were false.

In Taiwan in March 2004, President Chen Shui-bian and Vice President Annette Lu were apparently the target of an assassination attempt on the eve of the election. A sympathy vote allowed them to pull ahead by 29,000 votes. Later it seemed that the assassination might have been faked. If so, it would be another case of political manipulation.

Add to these the more familiar cases of the “Willie Horton” ads deployed against Michael Dukakis in 1988 and the “Swift Boat Veterans for Truth” ads deployed against John Kerry in 2004.

Some of the Willie Horton ads and all the Swift Boat ads reflect the fact that campaign warfare is increasingly “asymmetrical.” Just as states now face non-state actors where deterrence breaks down because the attack has no clear return address (no one knows who the terrorists are or how to find them), so political campaigns face attacks from third parties that also have no clear return address. The beneficiaries can keep their hands clean,
avoiding public responsibility for the attacks. And if a campaign dialogue is hijacked by a new dimension or a trivial one, the result is literally MAD, what I would call mutually assured distraction.

Consider a policy example outside the context of elections. Interest groups now launch campaign-like advertising combined with lobbying. The coal industry has repeatedly mounted campaigns on behalf of tax subsidies for so-called clean coal. The ads describe how much cleaner and how much better for the environment clean coal is, never making it clear that the tax subsidies could divert energy use away from much cleaner sources. Clean coal may be cleaner than dirty coal, but it is much dirtier than natural gas or renewable energy. Note in this case the use of strategically incomplete rather than false information. One successful wave of these efforts led to the Energy Policy Act of 2005, which included large tax subsidies for clean coal which the Bush administration implemented.

We live in a society that values freedom of expression and association—as a matter of right. The system of freedom of expression presumes that many forms of advocacy take place. What is the dividing line between mere advocacy and something that is presumably objectionable (even if lawful) that might be termed manipulation? Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar suggest a definition in the course of their important study of negative advertising: “Manipulation involves leading voters to select politicians who ultimately do not represent the individual’s interests and preferences.”

This definition, while suggestive, does not cover all the terrain sketched here. First, I am interested in including efforts to manipulate voters, not only about candidate choice but also about policy choice. Second, to the extent independents are intentionally caused to change their behavior by staying home or voting otherwise than they would, this definition, as interpreted in Going Negative, would not term the intervention manipulation. As they operationalize their definition, voters have to have a stable party preference (representing their interests and preferences) which they are led away from by the manipulation, and independents do not have such a preference. Even if they are led to change their vote by negative ads (and 6 percent did in the study), this change was not viewed as manipulation since they had no stable party preference from which they were dissuaded. Instead Ansolabehere and Iyengar simply termed such results “worrisome” but not manipulation.

In my view, all the cases mentioned are manipulation, including the calculated effort to reduce turnout, a possible use of negative ads according to Ansolabehere and Iyengar. The definition I would suggest is something like:

A person has been manipulated by a communication when she has been exposed to a message intended to change her views in a way she would not accept if she were to think about it on the basis of good
conditions—and in fact she does change her views in the manner that was intended.

So, if she is fooled by misinformation and changes her views on that basis, then she has been manipulated. If she had good information instead, then on this definition, her views would not have changed.

In the Zinoviev case, it is likely that the voters who were changed were not Labour voters, since there was widespread sympathy for the Soviet Union among Labour voters in the early years of the Soviet Union. Rather, it was most likely independent voters who were switched and Conservative voters who were mobilized who might not have voted at all otherwise.

In the Australian case where the Howard campaign claimed that the immigrants threw their children overboard in order to gain admission to the country, there was no problem of mobilization since Australia has compulsory voting. But the sensational incident primed immigration as the key issue when it had not been a top issue at all before then in the election. It changed the basis for voting. If voters had known that the sensational charges were false and known to be false, this hijacking of an election soon before the vote through priming would not have succeeded. As one press report after the Senate inquiry summarized it, the Howard government “exploited voters’ fears of a wave of illegal immigrants by demonising asylum-seekers.”

In the case of Willie Horton, the combustible focus group tested ads primed crime and Dukakis’s judgment as issues for decision, based on a misleading account of a single incident. In the case of the Swift Boats, false allegations primed Kerry’s character as the issue. The Swift Boat campaign may well have swung the election given how close it was.

In the case of the clean coal ads, if citizens had the facts about the competing energy choices, they would be unlikely to support incentives for coal compared to natural gas and renewable energy. The apparent facts are strategically incomplete, laying out the advantages of so-called clean over dirty coal, but not compared to the other alternatives.

In the case of negative ads being used to intentionally demobilize voters, if I would have voted were it not for the negative ads intended to get me not to vote, my behavior has been changed in the direction intended. And I am assuming that if a voter deliberated, she would likely cast a vote rather than just stay home. Or at least this would be the case in many elections where negative ads succeed in getting people to stay home. For those cases, there are clear grounds for claiming manipulation on this view.

In all these cases, the definition of manipulation turns in part on the alternative of good conditions and good information we are hypothesizing as a benchmark for comparison. Those good conditions are in fact, a good part of what I mean by deliberation, a process we attempt to implement empirically in the conduct of Deliberative Polling.

By hypothesizing what people would think under good conditions as
a point of comparison, we are not asserting that whenever people are not deliberating they are then being manipulated. Others must actually *intend* to manipulate opinion in a given direction for the opinions to be manipulated. And the good conditions defined by deliberation are just a benchmark for comparison—a way of clarifying what is short circuited by manipulation. Perhaps manipulators want me to think X. Perhaps I would in fact think X, if I deliberated about the issue (particularly if I considered the competing arguments and had good information about them). On the definition offered here, I have not been manipulated if that is the case and I do think X.6

We can think of deliberation and manipulation as poles on a continuum. At one end we have good conditions and at the other end we have severely distorted conditions intentionally created in order to influence behavior. The good conditions include balanced messages with reasonably accurate information. Balance means that arguments offered are answered in a substantive way by arguments reflecting a competing side and those arguments are answered in turn and so on. And the information employed in these messages is factual and accurate. When arguments are offered and then answered substantively in turn, strategically incomplete arguments are defused. For example, a clean coal advocate could talk about how much better clean coal is than dirty coal, but the case for adopting clean coal would have to face criticism from the advocates of other cleaner sources. At the other end of the continuum, we have unbalanced and inaccurate messages. Arguments offered are not answered. And the lack of substantive balance and the inaccuracies are intended to move opinion in a given direction.

What is the difference between manipulation and persuasion? In a society valuing free speech, we fill the airwaves with persuasion. Clearly, there will be areas on the continuum where it is hard to distinguish. But the end points make it clear. The messages in deliberation are intended to persuade, but in a dialogue or debate in which accurate information is available and in which it is expected that the other side will have its say. Hence clear misinformation or strategically incomplete arguments that would collapse if the other side were voiced would be avoided in deliberative processes. At the other pole, the knowing use of such misinformation or misleading information is the point of the message. Perhaps you have an overwhelming ad buy or perhaps you know the charges are sensational they will receive a massive hearing, drowning out any response. Persuasion is the life blood of politics and policymaking. Manipulation is its objectionable form. But from the standpoint of democratic theory, what, if anything, is wrong with manipulation even in its supposedly objectionable form? The answer depends on your theory of democracy. On some theories, there are no grounds for objection. But that only helps to clarify the debate about what it is that we should ultimately value about democracy.
Four Democratic Theories

To distill a longer discussion down to its essentials, I want to reduce the variety of democratic theories down to four. These four theories are distinctive combinations of four basic principles—political equality, deliberation, mass participation, and non-tyranny. Elsewhere I have developed this account in detail so I will try to just quickly summarize it here. I have argued that while there are, in theory, sixteen possible combinations of commitments to these four principles, the ones that have serious normative interest reduce to four: competitive democracy, elite deliberation, participatory democracy, and deliberative democracy.

The four democratic theories each make an explicit commitment to two of the principles and leave open what they say about the other two. Their position on the other two can be taken as an empirical question or as a question that they are just not concerned about. I indicate their commitment to the principles of central concern by a “+” and their agnosticism about the other principles by a “?” (see Table 1.1).

The four positions are prominent and recognizable. First consider competitive democracy. Here the idea popularized by Joseph Schumpeter and more recently championed by Richard Posner and Ian Shapiro is that democracy is about the “competitive struggle for the people’s vote.” But like many adversary processes, the key is winning by whatever means available within the rules. And the rules do little or nothing to prevent the public from being bamboozled, misled, or manipulated in the ways already catalogued.

I have adjusted the position slightly to commit it to political equality in the equal counting of votes. Schumpeter, unlike his successors, was notoriously unconcerned about equally counting the votes of everyone. The basic idea is that we let the parties compete as teams that will peacefully settle the question of who governs, and we allow courts to protect rights to ensure against tyranny of the majority or other truly objectionable abuses. But if really intense competition produces manipulation, that is just how the rough game of politics is played. Hard political competition among competing teams of elites has greater normative appeal if the votes are counted equally. But the issues of extreme preference distortion, what

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we have been calling manipulation, are a continuing vulnerability of the position.

A second democratic theory, by contrast, prizes deliberation—but only by elites or representatives. Deliberation requires the balanced and informed weighing of competing arguments on their merits on the basis of good information. We will say more about this below, but, clearly, the deficiencies that permit manipulation are, by and large, responded to by deliberation. Note that the elite deliberation position does not require political equality. It is deliberation by elites—as with the Madisonian picture of filtered public opinion by representatives who “refine and enlarge the public views” as Madison posited famously in Federalist 10. It is not a position that encourages mass participation. Once again, there is a concern for protecting against tyranny of the majority, but an argument that deliberation itself may better serve the public interest than would non-deliberative public opinion.

A third democratic theory prizes the combination of mass participation and political equality. One can imagine more and more decisions becoming the purview of plebiscitary democracy or mass decision. But as I argue elsewhere it is very difficult to foster serious mass public deliberation. Each individual in the large scale nation state has incentives for “rational ignorance” and, in that sense, little reason to pay attention and become informed about the details of public policy issues. Participatory democracy may signal a certain kind of mass consent, typified by a referendum, but it need not be a very thoughtful or informed sort of consent. Referendum campaigns can be as misleading and bamboozling as candidate elections, as most observers of initiative, referendum, and recall in the western U.S. states will attest.

A fourth democratic theory would embrace the combination of deliberation and political equality. The idea is that the mass public should somehow deliberate and its deliberations should be made consequential for public decisions. One clear strategy for achieving this combination of political equality and deliberation is the deliberative microcosm chosen by lot or random sampling—a form of democracy that goes back to ancient Athens. Every citizen has an equal chance of being selected and the processes themselves attempt to embody political equality. But in addition, the discussions attempt to be substantive and balanced on the basis of good information. As we have seen, the provision of substantive and balanced information, in a context where people pay attention to it, can be an antidote to manipulation.

Facilitating the Public Will

One reason to argue for one of the two deliberative theories (elite deliberation or deliberative democracy) is that without some such commitment there are no really fundamental grounds for objecting to the kind of
Manipulation and Democratic Theory

We surveyed at the beginning, the kind that clearly undermines any claim to collective informed consent. What could consent of the governed mean if the people are simply misled? Participatory democracy and competitive democracy do not deal with the issue of preference formation; they deal with how people vote or participate with the preferences they have. Once the issue of preference formation is highlighted, then there are grounds for demanding that people get good information, have access to arguments on competing sides, and have the chance to weigh the merits of those arguments—in short, that they deliberate to some substantial degree.

If one believes that public will formation is potentially meaningful, then manipulation is objectionable, because it is intended to undermine and distort the public will for the sake of political advantage. By contrast, deliberation is to be prized on such a perspective because it facilitates public will formation. It facilitates the provision of competing reasons that are to be weighed in the process of the people making up its mind.

Yet the deliberative microcosm chosen by random sampling, brought to realization in the modern era with efforts such as Deliberative Polling, is not necessarily efficacious in undermining manipulation. A key problem is that manipulation may work with the broader public even if it encounters an antidote in the deliberations of a microcosm.

One strategy is to make the deliberations of the microcosm consequential in themselves. In that way, deliberation by the microcosm, rather than manipulation of the broader public, is consequential in its impact. In Texas, a series of Deliberative Polls were employed in “Integrated Resource Planning” to decide how electric power was to be provided in each of the state’s eight regulated service territories. The deliberations were balanced and informative. The real benefits of coal, availability and price, were weighed against environmental effects. The meaning of clean coal came out in the discussion since advocates of all the competing energy sources answered questions on the same panel. While support for coal was modest in most of the eight projects, support for renewable energy and for natural gas (which is cleaner than coal) was consistently high. The eight projects led directly to massive investments in wind power, moving Texas from one of the lowest states in wind power in 1996 to the leading state by 2007.

The key in Texas was that the microcosm was empowered to the extent that the official integrated resource plans had to take account of the results of the Deliberative Poll. It is not at all clear what the results might have been if the issue had been decided simply in open meetings or by referendum. In open meetings self-selected groups of lobbyists or advocates could have distorted the process. In a referendum campaign subject to advertising techniques, manipulation of the results would certainly have been possible. But in the transparently balanced and substantive atmosphere of a microcosmic deliberation, the strategies of misinformation or strategically incomplete information can be countered among those who
decide. And a microcosm of the mass public will tend to come with an open mind and be available to weigh arguments on the merits.

The basic idea of a deliberating microcosm is not, by itself, enough to avoid manipulation. Random sampling is extremely useful to prevent capture by self-selected groups that could mobilize to distort and in that sense offer a pseudo-public consultation. Norman Bradburn, former director of the National Opinion Research Center, has coined the term SLOPs for self-selected listener opinion polls, and there are many public consultations, especially those that take place online, that purport to represent the public but that actually represent efforts to capture a representation of public opinion through mobilization. SLOPs allow people to vote over and over and to offer their intense views as if they were, representative of the broader mass public. Random sampling engages social science to prevent capture and create a microcosm. Of course then, the question is what are the good conditions to which the microcosm is subjected.

A second guarantee against manipulation is the avoidance of false consensus through social pressure. Public consultations that seek agreement, in the mode of jury verdicts, will expose participants to social pressure to reach agreement. It is a far better guarantee to avoid consensus-seeking processes and to gather the opinions, before and after, in confidential questionnaires or secret ballots.

A third institutional design that can help avoid manipulation is to arrange for an advisory committee for the process that includes the competing stakeholders. If policy elites have to agree on an account of the initial basis for discussion, the competing arguments that most deserve a hearing on the basis of good information, then they lose their opportunity to distort the process with misinformation or strategically incomplete information. In Deliberative Polls, an advisory group typically involves all the competing stakeholders who have to agree on a briefing document suitable for the mass public. This briefing document lays out the main policy options with arguments for and against, agreed to by the competing stakeholders and experts. They need not (and will not) agree about what should be done. But they can agree that the information in the briefing document is accurate and that the main arguments on either side have been expressed clearly and in a balanced way. The work from such an advisory group is a useful and simple institutional bulwark against manipulation of the microcosm.

A fourth institutional design is the use of moderated small group discussions that ensure balance and that prevent anyone from dominating the discussions. The key nexus for deliberation is a manageably small group discussion that allows balanced participation in an atmosphere of mutual respect. Trained moderators can do a great deal to facilitate such discussions.

But even with an appropriate institutional design that avoids manipulation of the microcosm, manipulation of the broader mass public is entirely
possible through the normal investments in strategic communication through the media. Even here, deliberating microcosms can be useful, however. A Deliberative Poll, for example, can offer a road map to responsible advocacy. By responsible advocacy, I mean advocacy based on good information and balanced argumentation. In a Deliberative Poll, when conducted well, the best arguments on each side have been tested against each other in a context where the public can get its questions answered and focus on the merits. The arguments that succeed in such an environment clearly have weight with the public if given an appropriate airing. Retracing that argumentation with good information is not manipulation, because it reproduces the considerations that weigh with the public under good conditions.

For example, in the European-wide Deliberative Poll, the contentious issue of pension reform revealed surprisingly that the EU public was willing to work longer and raise the retirement age in order to keep the current “pay as you go” pension systems solvent. Once they realized the demographic and fiscal challenges ahead, the changing ratios of retirees compared to workers and the resulting deficits facing the pension systems if the current retirement ages and benefits were kept in place, deliberators moved to support keeping the benefits but paying for them by working to a later age. They preferred this solution to privatizing the systems, probably because of the risks involved in individual accounts. These results suggest a strategy for successful advocacy of how to keep the pay as you go systems solvent but with a clear sacrifice (later retirement) as part of the trade-off. The demographic and fiscal information about what would happen with continuation of the status quo is a necessary backdrop to the success of the argument.

Democratic practices have largely traced a path from Madison (who conceived of adapting the public will to a Republic in the late eighteenth century) to Madison Avenue (the home of the advertising industry). But there is a crucial distinction between manipulative practices of persuasion, which we tolerate for selling consumer products, and the sort of collective public will formation that makes democracy meaningful. Some democratic theories do not aspire to collective will formation. In our typology of four theories, only two make the thinking processes of the public central. The two deliberative theories (whether the deliberations of representatives on behalf of the people or the deliberations by the people themselves) provide at least a partial antidote to manipulation. For the other two theories, there is no fundamental basis for objecting to manipulation. For those theories, the key is just that there be elections, no matter how distorted in substance, or that there be participation, no matter what the people are thinking, or not thinking. If one wishes to revise participatory or competitive democracy to take account of manipulation, one enters the realm of at least some commitment to deliberation, some commitment to the notion that the people not be misled or have their views determined
on grounds other than those they would think defensible if they thought about it. Avoiding manipulation, one is led to deliberation—to at least some degree and in some institutional contexts by or on behalf of the people. The cure for Madison Avenue is a dose of Madison, or at least the value Madison emphasized but thought most suitable for representatives.

Notes

3. Ansolabehere and Iyengar, Going Negative, p. 95.
5. Manipulation is sometimes used more broadly, but I am focusing here on its objectionable forms.
9. See http://cdd.stanford.edu/polls/cu