

BEYOND CUES AND POLITICAL ELITES:
THE FORGOTTEN ZALLER

ABSTRACT: *Zaller's Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion initially sets out an epistemic view of politics in which the ultimate determinants of political action are ideas about the society in which we act. These ideas are usually mediated to us by others, so Zaller begins the book by describing its topic as the influence of the media on public opinion, and he includes journalists among the "political elites" who exert this influence (along with politicians, public officials, and experts). But the book eventually reduces journalists to being messengers of politicians' cues to the public. This understanding of the media is built into the book's model of opinion formation, in which cued predispositions are pivotal to the acceptance or rejection of culturally mediated "messages"—but are themselves insulated from cultural influence. A cueing model of message reception, however, ignores messages that are differentially persuasive not because of the predispositions they cue but the content they convey. Gauging the heterogeneous persuasiveness of messages requires qualitative content analysis and cultural contextualization, and if this research is to contribute to a general understanding of public opinion, it will have to extend beyond news-media messages to ideational influences carried in high culture, formal education, and the entertainment media. All of these sources of ideas, in turn, may contribute to the shaping of predispositions, as suggested in part by public opinion regarding the Vietnam War. Research of this kind would signal a new type of political science that focused on the actual thoughts of real people trying to understand a complex environment: exactly the type of political science suggested at the beginning of Zaller's book.*

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The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion (Cambridge University Press, 1992) has been widely hailed and rightly so. It is one of a handful of truly great books written by a political scientist in the twentieth century. Befitting the accolades, it is densely argued and packed with insight. It is also somewhat ambiguous. At least two basic readings of the book are possible, one at odds with the other.

The first reading is that politicians and public officials dominate public opinion through the mass media. This reading is presupposed by the symposium contributions of Stanley Feldman, Leonie Huddy, and George E. Marcus (2013), Paul Goren (2013), Cindy D. Kam (2013)—and Zaller (2013) himself. The second reading is that the media dominate public opinion, and that politicians and public officials are merely some of the most influential contestants in the ongoing battle to gain the sympathy of journalists. The paper by Jennifer L. Hochschild (2013) fits better with this reading, because she notices that Zaller often uses a notion of “elites” that is not restricted to politicians and public officials (although she does not emphasize the role of journalists as the final authorities on what the public hears, sees, and reads).

More is at stake here than the interpretation of a great book or even the actual role of the news media in shaping public opinion. The two readings of Zaller reflect—and reinforce—fundamentally different understandings of our political predicament. Thus, they imply contrasting views of the proper objects of political science and its proper procedures.

Who Are Zaller’s “Elites”?

As Larry M. Bartels’s contribution to the symposium suggests, the usual reading of the book has been the first one, where narrowly defined political elites—politicians and public officials, not journalists—dominate public opinion (Bartels 2013). One way to test this suggestion is to ask whether, in the twenty years since Zaller’s book appeared, political science has seen an upsurge of research on how reporters, editors, and commentators decide which information to present to the public and how to interpret it. I doubt that anyone would claim that there has been such an upsurge. My explanation is that in the received view of Zaller’s book, journalists play no greater role in affecting public opinion than do the people who run newspaper printing presses or build microwave transmission towers. In this view, to be sure, journalists are instrumental

in public communication, but only as cogs in a machine whose function is to deliver to citizens the positions (and sometimes even the arguments) of politicians and public officials.¹

However, Zaller (1992, 13–14) maintained, at least initially, that journalists are far more influential than that. The overt theoretical framework of *Nature and Origins* is laid out in chapter 2, “Information, Predispositions, and Opinion.” Here Zaller points out that “the public opinion that exists on a given issue can rarely be considered a straightforward response to ‘the facts’ of a situation,” because only a small selection of facts can be reported (*ibid.*, 13). And Zaller opens the chapter by quoting Walter Lippmann’s classic, *Public Opinion* (1922 [1997], 53):

Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth’s surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect. . . . Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine. (Zaller 1992, 6)

“The facts” must be “reported” to us, as must their relevance to a particular political dispute or public-policy proposal. That is, a small sample of facts must be interpreted as representative of the larger, invisible situation being discussed. Political “information,” Zaller (*ibid.*, 13) writes, is therefore “unavoidably selective and unavoidably enmeshed in stereotypical frames of reference that highlight only a portion of what is going on.”

Where, then, do we get our political information and interpretations? Zaller (1992, 6) answers that

the “others” on whom we depend, directly or indirectly, for information about the world are, for the most part, persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs—that is, political elites. These elites include politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists.

Without the selection and interpretation of information by these elites, the political world would remain a “blooming, buzzing confusion” (*ibid.*, 7, quoting Lippmann quoting James).²

Thus, the role of “elites” in chapter 2 of *Nature and Origins* is purely epistemic. Zaller was not saying that elites convey *the truth* to the public.

But he did suggest that only when the facts that elites select and interpret paint a credible picture of the larger situation at stake in a political dispute—however inaccurate this picture might turn out to be—can people form opinions about that situation or take actions to address it. “All political actors,” Zaller (1992, 328) observes, “must form some view of what is happening in the world before undertaking any action.” This observation, I will contend, could have been, and still should be, the cornerstone of a new political science.

Of the various types of elite whom Zaller names on page 6—“politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists,³ and many kinds of experts and policy specialists”—journalists would seem to be the ones who are most ideally suited to report and interpret information to the public. To the extent that they maintain their carefully defended reputation for honesty, independence, and objectivity, journalists can be expected, other things equal, to be taken seriously when they tell their audience: “That’s the way it is.” In contrast, while one certainly can see how politicians, government officials, activists, and experts (among others) might also convey and interpret certain facts to the public, politicians do not, in general, have a reputation for honesty, independence, and objectivity; and government officials, activists, and experts can rarely communicate with the mass public except through journalists. So at first glance, it is strange that in the scholarly wake of Zaller’s book, it was politicians and government officials who were seen as having the greatest influence on the public—not journalists.

In a book chapter published in 1996, Zaller reiterated his contention that the media, not politicians, shape public opinion. The title of the chapter, “The Myth of Massive Media Impact Revived: New Support for a Discredited Idea,” says it all. For decades, political scientists had rejected the idea that the media exert “massive” (as opposed to “minimal”) effects on public opinion, but Zaller’s chapter, and the case studies from *Nature and Origins* on which it is largely based, make the minimalist view seem almost bizarrely obtuse. Zaller (1996, 26, 38–42) shows that the media have massive short-term effects all the time—one need only think of spikes in public awareness of a plane crash or a new presidential candidate, which, realistically, can be due only to media influence. He therefore contends bluntly that the media have the power to “pus[h] people around” (*ibid.*, 38) and that they exercise this power routinely.

On the other hand, in the 1996 chapter, Zaller (1996, 21) expresses his goal in *Nature and Origins* as having been to show the influence of “political elites—mainly politicians and journalists—in shaping mass opinion.” The examples in the 1996 chapter exclusively concern the impact of journalistic elites on public opinion, but the 1992 book, while containing much more discussion of journalists than one typically finds in scholarship on public opinion, ends up drastically downplaying the role of journalists as compared to politicians and government officials—despite the epistemically oriented theoretical framework set forth in chapter 2.

The conflicting messages of the book can be seen in the following passage from that chapter: “When I refer in the course of this book to the ‘information carried in elite discourse about politics,’ as I often will, I will be referring to the *stereotypes, frames of reference, and elite leadership cues* that enable citizens to form conceptions of and, more importantly, opinions about events that are beyond their full personal understanding” (Zaller 1992, 13–14, *emph. added*). *Stereotypes* is the term Lippmann used for interpretations of the world that have become so intuitively plausible that they don’t seem to be interpretations at all. By “frames of reference,” Zaller means newer interpretations that have not yet jelled into stereotypes (*ibid.*, 7–8). Clearly, journalists are well positioned to relay and repeat stereotypes and frames of reference. But “elite leadership cues” are signals sent by politicians (or elected public officials) to their partisan or ideological followers. The only information that is conveyed by such cues is that “trusted sources” (*ibid.*, 276)—partisan or ideological leaders of one or another stripe—favor or believe something. This is information, no doubt, and it may make certain positions or the arguments for them seem more credible to those who are cued. But it is not information about the situation in the world that parties and ideologists are trying to address, unlike straight news reports, “stereotypes,” and “frames of reference.” Cues simply trigger an automatic positive or negative response (depending on the identities of the cue giver and the cue recipient) to a proposal, a candidate, a factual claim, or an interpretive claim. This response is not to information about, or interpretation of, the invisible world that is the object of political action. It is a response to the shared predispositions about that world that are already held by the sender and the recipient of the cue.

“Predispositions,” Zaller (1992, 23) writes, “are the critical intervening variable between the communications people encounter in the mass

media, on one side, and their statements of political preferences, on the other.” One might better say that predispositions short-circuit the epistemic process of perceiving and interpreting new information about the world; or, at best, that they bias this process.

In a sense, interpretations themselves can be considered biases: they are arguments for treating some “data” as more relevant than others, i.e., they draw boundaries around a small subset of the infinite universe of information that might be relevant to the aspect of the real world (an economic problem, a social problem, a foreign-policy problem) being politically debated. Since limited beings such as ourselves cannot achieve an unbiased sampling of all the conceivably relevant data, we must somehow draw a line between germane and irrelevant data. Interpretations are arguments for drawing the line here rather than there. Interpretations thus bias the data sample—regardless of whether the bias turns out to be justified because the subset of facts thus delimited as “the” facts truly represents the reality at issue. Anyone’s attempt to understand the external world, then, including the political world, will display this inevitable form of bias.

Predispositional biases, in contrast, are not delivered by, or inherent in, information about the political world. They are instead interpretations of the political world that are somehow built into our very identities, such that they are not susceptible to outside influence—at least this is how Zaller treats them, for reasons both normative and methodological. Methodologically, predispositions subject to exogenous influence could not be treated as independent variables that determine people’s reaction to “information.” Normatively, predispositions subject to *cultural* influence would, according to the picture of media influence set forth by Zaller, almost necessarily be subject to elite influence, making democracy a sham. Thus, Zaller (1992, 23) emphasizes that in his model of public opinion, “elites are *not* assumed to have an important role in shaping individuals’ political predispositions.” Therefore, whoever can cue one of our predispositions can circumvent the information and interpretations of the external world mediated to us by the likes of journalists, even though the cue giver often needs journalists to transmit to the public the cues that activate its latent predispositions. The predisposition, an endogenous variable, can determine people’s opinions, regardless of what journalists or anyone else say about the issue at hand, as long as the predisposition is cued.

Thus, there is a nexus between predispositions that are insulated from elite influence and the mainstream, non-epistemic interpretation of Zaller's book (and of politics). In the non-epistemic view, unlike the Lippmannite view, the politically important role of the media is not to deliver a selection of facts (other than cues) and interpretations to the public. Indeed, reports of facts become irrelevant, and interpretations are baked into the public before public opinion forms. None of this, however, is established through evidence of the endogenous source of predispositions (Zaller does not provide such evidence). It is established by an assumption built into Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model of opinion formation.

Beyond Cues

The RAS model is a theory of how survey responses are formed. First, a survey respondent must have received some message. This requires having read, seen, or heard the message, as well as having understood it. Second, she must have implicitly accepted its veracity instead of rejecting it as implausible. Zaller calls a received and accepted message a "consideration." Third and finally, when asked for an opinion by a pollster, the respondent constructs an answer by "averaging across the considerations" that happen to be at the top of her head (Zaller 1992, 49).

Predispositions enter the model in Zaller's formalization of the second step. Instead of an Acceptance Axiom, there is a Resistance Axiom, which holds that people "tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions" (Zaller 1992, 44). For this to work conceptually, we have to be able to distinguish "arguments" that are presented culturally—e.g., through the media—from predispositions that can resist those arguments. This distinction entails that predispositions are immune from cultural influence (hence from "elite" influence), at least once a predisposition has taken root—which necessarily must have happened before an RAS analysis of message acceptance or resistance begins.

Zaller (1992, 23) acknowledges that it is "likely that, over the long run, the elite ideas that one internalizes [in the short run] have some effect on one's values and other predispositions." But he brackets this possibility because *Nature and Origins* is "a study of opinion formation and change in particular short-term situations." Moreover, his most

extensive comments on the probable sources of predispositions omit elite influences entirely. “My assumption,” Zaller (*ibid.*) writes,

is that predispositions are at least in part a distillation of a person’s lifetime experiences, including childhood socialization, and direct involvement with the raw ingredients of policy issues, such as earning a living, paying taxes, racial discrimination, and so forth. Predispositions also partly depend on social and economic location and, probably at least as strongly, on inherited or acquired personality factors and tastes.

Yet, according to Zaller (*ibid.*, 13), “Even topics that are within the direct experience of some citizens, such as poverty, homosexuality, and racial inequality, are susceptible to widely different understandings, depending on how facts about them are framed or stereotyped.”⁴ This would seem to rule out “social and economic location” and culturally unmediated distillations of “experiences” as sources of predispositions—although it would rule in various interpretations of such locations and experiences that could be mediated by the mass media and other cultural sources.

The Resistance Axiom, however, bars such interpretations as sources of predispositions. The function of predispositions in the axiom is to resist (or accept) short-term cultural influences. If the predispositions of those we are studying are to function this way, then we, the political scientists, have to make a sharp distinction between (exogenous) cultural influences and (endogenous) predispositions. In principle, Zaller could have located such predispositions in personality traits, as he suggested in the quoted passage. But at the time, there was no reliable evidence that personality traits affect political opinions. In the end, then, Zaller (*ibid.*) names partisan identities, ideological convictions, and values⁵ as predispositions, even though he concedes that values in particular may be culturally malleable; and even though ideologies—which are constantly evolving—*must* be malleable.

Having established, purely by definition, that predispositions are fixed, the Reception Axiom directs our attention to mediated messages that cue predispositions. In the case of ideology, there was ample precedent for Zaller (1992, 274) to investigate cueing. Philip E. Converse (1964 [2006], 10) had demonstrated that in the 1950s, the vast bulk of the U.S. electorate was almost completely unable to identify which issue positions “went with” being a liberal or a conservative. He called the information that would enable an ideologue to make this type of ideological identification “contextual” information. For example, contextual information in the early

twenty-first century would tell American conservatives that “the conservative positions” are to be pro-choice about gun ownership and pro-life about abortion.

The Resistance Axiom reads, in its entirety:

People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions. (Zaller 1992, 44)

According to the Resistance Axiom, if one identifies as a conservative, one will be predisposed to resist liberal messages, *whatever they might be*; but without contextual cues, one might be unable to distinguish them from conservative messages, and thus one might end up accepting them—endorsing gun control, for example, on the basis of inferences drawn from media coverage of a mass shooting.

Zaller’s book (and much research inspired by the book, which is reviewed by Kam and Zaller below) provides many case studies of ideologues and partisans changing their positions on a given issue after ideological or partisan elites changed theirs. For example, Zaller (1992, 97) recalls that when President Nixon imposed wage and price controls on August 15, 1971, support for these measures skyrocketed “virtually overnight” from 37 percent to 82 percent among Republican activists; Nixon was, of course, a Republican. But such examples do not, in themselves, establish, for example, if the Republican activists changed their opinions merely because Nixon was a Republican and they were predisposed to adopt whatever position on the issue “went with” being a Republican; or if instead they changed their opinions because, as Zaller often puts it, Nixon (in this case) was, to them, a “trusted source” of *information and interpretation* about whether wage and price controls were necessary. Did cueing the activists’ predispositions automatically cause the change in their opinions, or did the predispositions cause them to listen sympathetically to the *reasons* for wage and price controls offered in Nixon’s nationally televised address on August 15? Both possibilities are consistent with the RAS model. But the latter possibility makes the content of Nixon’s speech, not the cue of Nixon’s party affiliation, the actual independent variable; in that case, the activists would have been using Nixon’s partisan affiliation as reason to trust what he said in his speech. However, if predispositions thus operate only as heuristics for the

trustworthiness of a source, then we must allow that, in principle, the persuasiveness of a message might overcome or neutralize this heuristic in a given case. But the RAS model would *not* allow that, except inasmuch as formally, it establishes a mere “tendency” for a properly cued predisposition to make its bearer resist a counter-predispositional message: tendencies may always, in a given case, be overridden by other tendencies.

If we interpret the examples presented in *Nature and Origins* and in subsequent research through the lens of the Lippmannite theoretical framework established in chapter 2, we would not necessarily come away thinking that cues are a predominant force in the shaping of public opinion. They might be; or cues might simply make some arguments seem more persuasive, or less so, as might other factors that are not included in the model and that might override the one factor in the model, predispositions, that can render a message more or less persuasive. Moreover, the fact that cued predispositions can be overcome, in principle, by counter-predispositional messages suggests that, in a given case, predispositions may be irrelevant to the outcome (an opinion or a political action). And it further suggests that predispositions may themselves be susceptible to cultural messages. Finally, since politicians are far from the only people who send cultural messages—and are far from the most persuasive messengers, *a priori*, given their well-known interest in bending the truth to *sound* as persuasive as possible—it would be unjustified to conclude that Zaller’s book established the importance of cued predispositions in shaping public opinion in general, even if it established its importance in particular cases.

Beyond Predispositions

Nature and Origins explicitly distinguishes between cueing information and “persuasive” information. Yet its description of persuasive messages is worded in a way that seems to affirm the primacy of cueing messages. Persuasive messages, Zaller (1992, 41) writes, are “arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or point of view.” Yet he goes on to say that cueing messages

enable citizens to perceive relationships between the persuasive messages they receive and their political predispositions, which in turn permits them to respond critically to the persuasive messages. Thus, a Republican

voter will be more likely to reject criticism of President Bush's budget plan if she recognizes that the person making the criticism is a Democrat. (Ibid., 42)

Read carelessly, this passage might imply that persuasive messages running counter to one's predispositions are necessarily or always trumped by cueing messages and, thus, by one's predispositions: As long as one receives the appropriate cue, one can notice the clash of a persuasive message with one's predispositions and "respond critically" to the persuasive message. The reader would have to inspect Zaller's wording closely to realize that it does not rule out the possibility that one's critical response may be insufficient to keep the persuasive message from changing one's mind. However, Zaller's treatment of voting in incumbents' re-election campaigns for the U.S. House in 1978 shows that persuasive messages can, indeed, overcome cued predispositions.

Zaller (1992, 218) assumed (unobjectionably, at the time) that because "most House elections are low-key contests in which only the incumbent manages to mount a serious campaign, most of what politically aware people encounter during and between campaigns will have a strong proincumbent bias." Between campaigns, the incumbent makes whatever news he or she can, while the challenger is as yet unknown and usually, Zaller implies, a nobody. Then, during campaigns, the media pay little attention to either candidate; and anyway, most voters don't read newspapers very carefully, if at all; so TV ads are crucial. The incumbent, however, is likely to be able to afford more ads than the challenger. At all times, then, the incumbent's message is likelier than a challenger's to reach the few constituents who pay serious attention to local politics.⁶ But well-informed constituents are not very good targets for the incumbent, because while "the people who know most about politics in general are also most heavily exposed to the incumbent's self-promotional efforts," these people, "as political sophisticates," are

also better able to evaluate and critically scrutinize the new information they encounter. So in the end, highly aware persons tend to be little affected by incumbent campaigns. . . . Meanwhile, at the low end of the awareness spectrum, those who pay little attention to politics tend to get little or no information about congressional politics. Hence they are also relatively unaffected by the efforts of the incumbent to build a personal following. This leaves the moderately aware most susceptible to influence: They pay enough attention to be exposed to the blandishments of the incumbent but lack the resources to resist. (Ibid., 19)

Picture a bell curve showing the likelihood that someone will vote to re-elect an incumbent from the party with which the voter does not identify (Zaller 1992, Fig. 2.3). In this curve, moderately informed “out-party” voters who defect to the incumbent are in the middle, poorly informed defectors to the incumbent are in the left tail, and relatively well-informed defectors are in the right tail. Zaller shows that information favoring the incumbent exerts a non-monotonic rather than a linear effect, with more information becoming less effective once a voter who is not from the incumbent’s party has enough information favoring her candidate that she can resist messages favoring the incumbent.

The easiest way to interpret this resistance is that the highly informed voters identify the incumbent’s party, recognize that this partisan affiliation conflicts with their own, and therefore vote for the challenger. However, Zaller cannot be saying this. Voters in the middle of the curve, and even in the left tail, cannot be so ignorant that they do not realize which party is represented by the incumbent: This information is right next to the candidate’s name on the ballot.⁷ Thus, the relatively low defection rates of those in the right tail cannot be due to the fact that they are especially likely to have gotten the contextual information necessary to activate their partisan predisposition; the voters in the middle and in the left tail are equally likely—that is, virtually certain—to have gotten the same information. Conversely, then, there must be something about the blandishments of the incumbent that *overrides* the partisan predispositions of those in the middle of the curve, such that these voters defect to the incumbent. Persuasive messages must be overcoming these voters’ cued partisan predispositions.

Thus, Zaller’s explanation for why highly informed voters, unlike those in the middle, tend *not* to defect to an incumbent of the other party is that they have an *informational* basis for three types of “resistance” to persuasive messages from the incumbent. Only one of these is predispositional, cued resistance, which Zaller (1992, 121) calls “partisan resistance.” In this case, however, the extra resistance of highly informed outpartisans to the incumbent’s messages cannot *merely* be the result of cued partisan predispositions, because the much larger number of defecting voters who are only moderately informed have (if only in the voting booth) received the same cue as have their better-informed peers.⁸ The additional resistance to the incumbent’s messages displayed by highly informed outpartisans must therefore stem from persuasive,

non-cueing messages that they receive from the challenger, but which are not received by moderately informed voters.

Since these messages counteract the incumbent's messages, Zaller (1992, 121) calls the resistance they create "countervalent." "Reception of countervailing considerations from the challenger's campaign, which only the most aware voters are able to achieve, gives highly aware outpartisans an informational basis for opposing the incumbent" (*ibid.*, 234). I infer that Zaller is contrasting this informational basis for resistance to the cueing basis that would be generated by the partisan cue alone—even though, strictly speaking, the cue is information—since all voters know that label (eventually).

In addition to receiving persuasive information during the campaign that leads to countervalent resistance, Zaller (1992, 218) writes, relatively well-informed voters "are likely to possess prior information that acts to dilute the effects of new ideas" that they hear from the incumbent. Zaller calls this third type of resistance, based on prior persuasive information (again, not cueing information), "inertial resistance."

Zaller (1992, 167) maintains that all three forms of resistance are "rooted in the RAS model," and that is clearly the case with partisan resistance, which is defined as follows: "Individuals may refuse to internalize new dominant messages that they recognize as inconsistent with their underlying predispositions" (*ibid.*, 121).⁹ They may refuse—but they may not. Persuasive messages may divert even highly informed voters from following their predispositions. Inertial and countervalent resistance also displays the power of persuasive information, even though this power is easy to confuse with partisan (predispositional) resistance because it happens to push voters in the direction of their predispositions. Therefore, the reading of Zaller's book that elevates cues over persuasive messages and media elites is a misreading, strictly speaking. We cannot know, in a given case, whether a cued predisposition will or will not determine opinion; that depends on how persuasive the counter-predispositional messages happen to be.

Beyond "Political Elites"

On page 1, Zaller (1992) announces that

the dynamic element in the argument—the moving part, so to speak—is coverage of public affairs information in the mass media. This coverage

may consist of ostensibly objective news reports, partisan argumentation, televised news conferences, or even paid advertisements, as in election campaigns.

In addition to the fact that this passage names “ostensibly objective news reports” as one of the dynamic elements in the argument, it is worth noting that campaign ads frequently invoke quotations and headlines from newspaper stories that lend credibility to the claim that the other candidate has taken an outrageous position (not merely a position one would expect from a candidate of that party) or that the advertised candidate did something wonderful. Candidates could not profitably use “ostensibly objective news coverage” in this way—let alone could ostensibly objective coverage have an independent effect on public opinion (as Zaller posits)—if such news coverage merely relayed cueing information, or even persuasive information, that came directly from narrowly defined political elites.

Zaller asserts in the 1996 chapter that “substantive messages tend to be more frequent and salient than source [cueing] messages—that is, more intense. As a result, people are more likely to be persuaded to form opinions on issues than they are to be aware of the ideological and partisan implications of the messages they accept” (Zaller 1996, 51). If these assertions are borne out, then “ostensibly objective journalism” that does not merely deliver cues or contextual information is likely to be more frequent and more persuasive than journalism that delivers cues or non-journalistic sources of information (paid ads as such, partisan argumentation, and news conferences).

Are Zaller’s assertions borne out? The first assertion, that substantive messages are a more frequent component of the news than contextual information, is easy to confirm, and difficult to falsify, simply by opening a newspaper or turning on the television set, impressionistic as such evidence may be. The bulk of news coverage seems to concern what is happening in the world, and the political arguments being made about what is happening and should happen, rather than merely whether liberal/conservative or Democratic/Republican politicians favor or oppose a given policy measure. Zaller’s more consequential assertion is the second one: that people are more likely to be moved by substantive arguments—persuasive messages—than by cues. Under some experimental conditions, this assertion has recently been confirmed (Bullock 2011), and it directly contradicts the notion that cueing is the most important vehicle through which the mass media may affect public

opinion. As *Nature and Origins* unfolds, however, it becomes harder and harder to avoid a different impression: that cueing *is* the most important thing.

This is not because the book provides evidence or a (non-axiomatic) theory suggesting either that mediated messages must originate with political elites; or that the majority of political messages, or the most important political messages, cue predispositions. It is because the bulk of the patterns of public opinion that are unveiled over the course of the book *might* solely be attributed to the cueing of predispositions by narrowly political elites—as in the case of Nixon’s wage and price controls. Zaller is able to produce many more complicated and fascinating examples as the book proceeds through case studies. These studies are consistent with the view that cues activate predispositions that blind people to any other consideration, making them robotically repeat the party line. But as we saw in the Nixon example, the studies are equally consistent with the view that cues serve as heuristics that predispose people to trust certain sources of information and interpretation more than other sources. In the latter case, there is no reason to assume a priori that these sources, or even distrusted sources, cannot, on their own, provide information that is so persuasive that it renders predispositions, and thus cues, irrelevant. However, Zaller does not present this alternative interpretation of any of his case studies, so careless readers cannot be faulted for thinking that the book shows the power of cues.

There is one major exception, though: Zaller’s treatment of public opinion regarding the Vietnam War. When this case is first mentioned in chapter 2, Zaller makes no reference to political elites or cues. Instead, he attributes opinion change about Vietnam solely to the interpretations of the war conveyed to the public by persuasive journalists. In the early 1960s, Zaller (1992, 8) writes,

the public was offered only one way to think about the war, namely as a struggle to preserve freedom by “containing Communism.” Even news stories that criticized government policy did so within a framework that assumed the paramount importance of winning the war and defeating communism. During this period, public support for American involvement in the war was very strong, and those members of the public most heavily exposed to the mass media supported the “official line” most strongly.

In the later phase of the war, however, journalists began to present information in ways suggesting that it was essentially a civil war among

contending Vietnamese factions and hence both inessential to U.S. security interests and also perhaps unwinnable. Coverage implicitly supportive of the war continued, but it no longer had near-monopoly status. Owing, as I show in Chapter 9, to this change in media coverage, public support for the war weakened greatly.

This succinctly stated case for the power of mediated interpretations of the war was amplified in the 1996 followup chapter, where Zaller (1996, 56, *emph. added*) helpfully distinguished between political elites and journalists:

The flow of mass communication evolved from consensual *elite and media* support for the war in 1964 to opposing and roughly evenly balanced messages and source cues in 1970. As this change occurred, public opinion evolved from a standard mainstream pattern, in which habitual news reception was associated with support for the war, to a standard polarization pattern, in which habitual news reception was associated with a polarization between liberals and conservatives.

Here Zaller adds, to his earlier declaration of the power of journalism, the suggestion that journalists operate autonomously from political elites. However, as this passage suggests, Zaller also saw the flow of messages about Vietnam as including changes in ideological “source cues,” and these end up dominating the discussion of Vietnam in *Nature and Origins*. As the book proceeds, the agency of journalists becomes, first, subordinated to narrowly political elites (chs. 8 and 9); and then subordinated to expert elites (ch. 11 and epilogue). Once journalists are reduced to conveying ideological cues originated by political or scientific elites, the possibility that journalists themselves were shaping public opinion cannot even arise. Thus, the discussion in chapter 2 of journalists’ framing of the war simply vanishes in the later chapters’ examination of the case.

Zaller (1992, 319n6) borrows the notion that journalists merely convey political elites’ cues from W. Lance Bennett’s claim (1990) that media coverage “indexes” the views of political elites, meaning that it reflects the distribution of political elites’ opinions. (In chapter 11 and the epilogue, Zaller [1992] modifies the indexing claim so that the media index the views of experts as well as politicians and government officials. Since Zaller seems now to have abandoned this claim, I do not discuss it.) My purpose in treating the Vietnam example in detail will be to show that the indexing model is utterly misleading when we

consider the question of the persuasiveness of messages; but that this weakness of the indexing model maps onto a similar weakness of the RAS model. Both models, in reducing the causes of public opinion to quantitative factors, are inherently unable to handle the qualitative issue of persuasiveness. The combined indexing/RAS models are thus unable to explain Zaller's main dependent variable: the shift in highly informed liberals' opinions about Vietnam in 1965–66.

For this shift to have been caused by a change in cues from liberal politicians (as reflected in news coverage), antiwar liberal politicians would have had to be cueing antiwar liberal predispositions. But the evidence presented by Zaller suggests instead that what was happening in 1965–66 (and later) is that new predispositions were being created by short-term cultural influences—rendering the RAS model inapplicable. To the extent that predispositions are changing or are, as yet, nonexistent, cues and their senders will be irrelevant in the shaping of public opinion. Vietnam seems to be such a case. But by the same token, it is a case that vindicates Zaller's initial description of opinion change in Vietnam in chapter 2.

Historical Problems with the Vietnam Case

U.S. involvement in Vietnam at first enjoyed bipartisan and cross-ideological support, but as Zaller sees it, liberal elites began turning against the war in 1965 or 1966, with the best-informed liberal members of the public quickly following their lead. Thus, he shows that in 1964, when liberal and conservative politicians both favored the Vietnam war almost unanimously, upwards of 70 percent of both well-informed conservatives and well-informed liberals also supported the war. Over the next two years, however, support for the war among relatively well-informed liberals plummeted by nearly 50 percent (Zaller 1992, Fig. 9.2). In chapter 11—the last chapter before the epilogue, and the chapter that wraps up the book's findings—Zaller (*ibid.*, 271) explains that “with the appearance of elite ideological disagreements in 1966¹⁰ . . . politically sophisticated liberals began to resist prowar messages and to accept antiwar ones. Thus, elite cues functioned to activate ideological predispositions among the politically aware.”

This cueing thesis represents a complete repudiation of the chapter-2 argument that public opinion (presumably including liberal opinion)

shifted against the war because journalists began to report it differently. But for at least two historical reasons, the cueing hypothesis is unlikely to be correct.

First, as of 1965–66, there were almost no liberal “elites”—in the narrow political sense—who might have delivered the cue, or the contextual information, that liberals now opposed the war. During this period, the war’s most prominent champion was Lyndon B. Johnson—arguably the most liberal president in U.S. history. In the wake of President Kennedy’s assassination in November 1963, Johnson had secured not only the passage of the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act, but the creation of Medicare, Medicaid, and federal aid to education. By contrast, the only prominent politician who argued against the war before 1967, in Zaller’s account, was Senator J. William Fulbright, whose televised hearings on Vietnam in 1966 are credited by Zaller (1992, 186, 189, 270) with cueing well-informed liberals to oppose the war. However, Fulbright was a racist and segregationist who had filibustered the Voting Rights Act of 1960 and the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and opposed the minimum wage (Woods 1995, 115, 302, 330, 219). This was not a man to be sending trustworthy source cues to liberals. Strictly as a matter of cues delivered by politicians, it should have been conservatives who began to oppose the war after the Fulbright hearings, not liberals.

Zaller (1992, 189) writes that the timing of the Fulbright hearings and of a 1967 congressional attempt to defund the war is “broadly consistent with the trends in media coverage, as depicted in Figure 9.1a.” He seems to mean that the Fulbright hearings and the attempt to defund the war were reflected in media coverage. This is a crucial claim, because without it, there would be no discernible way for antiwar cues from liberal politicians to be reaching liberal members of the public. So Figure 9.1a bears examination.

The Figure displays a research assistant’s count of what he deemed to be prowar, antiwar, and balanced stories in news magazines that featured Vietnam on the cover from 1960 to 1970. It shows that the number of prowar stories began to decline after 1966, from roughly 85 that year to 65 in 1968. Perhaps the Fulbright hearings negatively influenced journalists’ view of the war, reducing the number of prowar stories they published. However, the Fulbright hearings were held in February of 1966; it is unlikely, albeit possible, that the bulk of the all-time high of 85 prowar stories that year all occurred in January. Moreover, the other curve in the Figure shows a rock-steady increase in *antiwar* stories across

the whole decade—a straight line at roughly a 20-degree angle, with ten antiwar stories in 1960, 20 in 1964, about 35 in 1968, and about 45 in 1970. If the media were merely indexing cues from politicians, and if the 1966 Fulbright hearings signify the beginning of antiwar cues, there should have been *no* antiwar stories before 1966 and a sharp spike upward from then until at least 1968. This is not at all the observed pattern. The steady upward trend in antiwar stories from 1960 to 1970 suggests that journalists had been turning against the war since the very beginning of U.S. involvement—*independent of politicians' cues*. Moreover, the change in the proportion of prowar to antiwar stories caused by the decline in prowar stories after 1966 does not explain why *liberals* should have been peculiarly affected by the shift away from a prowar bias.

Zaller's data on media coverage and opinion change during the Vietnam War, then, do not seem compatible with either the indexing model of media coverage or the RAS model of opinion formation. Against the indexing model, there must have been something other than politicians' cues to exert a steadily negative effect on journalists' opinions about the war from the start, even during the period in which politicians from both parties and both sides of the ideological divide supported the war. Against the RAS model, no prominent liberal politician turned against the war until 1967. But there is another problem with applying the RAS model to this case. Not only were there no antiwar cues from prominent liberal politicians in 1965 or 1966, but it is questionable whether there were liberal antiwar predispositions to be cued.

As Zaller (1992, 209) writes, "internationalism had been a core element of the liberal belief package for some thirty years." By internationalism, Zaller means a propensity to use the American military to fight against opponents of democracy. His thirty-year estimate may understate the case, as most prominent liberals had supported not only World War II and the Korean War but World War I (Eisenach 1984, ch. 1), making liberal internationalism a fifty-year trend by 1966.¹¹ Conservatives, by contrast, had opposed U.S. involvement in World War I and World War II (initially) and, in many significant cases—such as that of the Senate Majority Leader, Republican Robert A. Taft—they had opposed the Korean War.

Chapters 8 and 9 of *Nature and Origins* repeatedly acknowledge the tradition of liberal internationalism (Zaller 1992, 176, 209), but they also treat liberal-internationalist sentiment as somehow having simply been superseded, especially among younger liberals, by a new antiwar

sentiment in 1965–66. There is every reason to think this is true, but it is not consistent with the cueing interpretation if we define antiwar sentiment as a predisposition. A predisposition cannot be cued before it exists. According to Zaller, the difference between the younger and older liberals in this period was that the younger liberals, not having lived through the earlier wars, tended not to have *any* particular attitudes about foreign affairs (*ibid.*, 176). In that case, what predisposition was cued in order to turn them against the Vietnam War?

Zaller (1992, 176) writes that “over the course of the Vietnam War, liberal support for internationalism at first weakened and then reversed. Liberalism came to be associated with the view that American intervention in Vietnam was a tragic and unwarranted intrusion into the internal affairs of another nation.” But surely the question is why this change occurred. And since the change amounts either to the replacement of a longstanding liberal predisposition by a new one, or else a major change in the “liberal” predisposition as a whole (depending on whether one defines antiwar sentiment and liberal internationalism as predispositions), the RAS model *cannot* explain the change, since the RAS model treats predispositions as fixed.

Bringing Ideas Back In

Before pulling these threads together—or, rather, unraveling the fabric of chapters 8, 9, and 11, and reweaving it into that of chapter 2—another implication of a cueing interpretation of Vietnam should be discussed. If the “liberal” predisposition as a whole was being cued in 1965–66 (as opposed to a new antiwar predisposition being created), the implication must be that the tumultuous shift of liberals against the war was due to nothing but a change in the definition of “liberalism.” This would be consistent with viewing ideologies as nothing more than bundles of policy positions that are connected to each other by arbitrary stipulation, such that they can be altered through definitional fiat by politicians who are already identified as “liberals” or “conservatives.”¹² All the politicians need do is send a cue that one or another policy position is no longer consistent with “liberalism” or “conservatism,” and their self-defined followers will duly change their positions. (By the same token, the cueing interpretation of Republican activists’ opinions about wage and price controls would be that President Nixon arbitrarily changed the

definition of what it “meant” to be a “Republican,” and the activists mindlessly went along with him.) Applying this view of ideology to the case of Vietnam, however, encounters two serious obstacles.

First, it suggests that the millions of people who vehemently turned against President Johnson, accusing him of mass murder; who angrily marched in antiwar demonstrations; and who, in some cases, became so radicalized that they advocated violent revolution and engaged in bombings and other forms of extreme protest—that what these people were upset about was that the Vietnam War violated what they viewed as the correct the definition of “liberalism.” Is this really plausible?

Ideologues, like everyone else, think that they have good reasons for their beliefs and that they know what these reasons are. No ideologue or partisan would accept definitional fiat as a good reason for holding a substantive belief. By “substantive,” I mean, for example, a belief about who, or what “system,” was responsible for the horrors of the Vietnam War. Obviously, people’s thoughts about their own beliefs can be incorrect, and it may be the role of the social scientist to demonstrate this. Ideologues and partisans may be wrong in their assessment of the actual reasons for which they hold a given substantive opinion. But as social scientists, we have no reason simply to ignore their self-assessments. If we are going to try to falsify them, we must first understand what these self-assessments are, then show why they are wrong. Invariably, people do not (at the time) understand their beliefs to be “motivated” by anything other than their perceptions of the truth. Thus, before we reach the conclusion that these perceptions are in some sense rationalizations (for self-interest or predispositional commitments) rather than being actual reasons, we should first investigate what these perceptions are and why people believe them to be accurate.

The “motivated reasoning” literature in psychology offers an object lesson in what happens if this procedure is not followed. For a decade, Leon Festinger’s *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (1957) inspired an avalanche of studies that seemed to show that the reasons that people *thought* justified their actions were mere “rationalizations” for other motives. In other words, people believed what they wanted to believe. But in the 1970s, this line of research foundered when it was pointed out that all the studies that “purported to demonstrate motivated reasoning could be interpreted in entirely cognitive, nonmotivational terms”; “people could draw self-serving conclusions, not because they wanted to

but because these conclusions seemed more plausible, given their prior beliefs and expectancies” (Kunda 1990, 480). The second wave of motivated-reasoning researchers, led by Ziva Kunda, were more careful, but political scientists, like the first wave of psychologists, have too eagerly leapt to the conclusion that opinions or behavior that they deem “irrational” cannot be explained by the reasons that might be offered by those who hold the opinions and engage in the behavior (Friedman 2012; Ross 2012). All too often, this is because political scientists have not bothered to familiarize themselves with what those reasons are. This would involve, in the present case, listening to what liberal antiwar demonstrators in 1965–66 said (not just how they responded to opinion surveys), reading what antiwar writers wrote, and so on.

For scholars of public opinion, *explaining away* people’s opinions (as rationalizations for something else) should surely be the last resort. Our first resort should be to take the Weberian step of trying to understand others’ opinions from within their own cognitive and cultural contexts. We should engage in *Verstehen* before we engage in reductionism. Zaller’s suggestion that people use the trustworthiness of a source in assessing the accuracy of information or interpretations from that source is fully consistent with *Verstehen*: It is quite possible that people would agree that the reason they believe *x* is that a trusted source argued for the truth of *x*. But we have no reason to assume that people’s primary trusted sources will tend to be politicians rather than, say, journalists. And we have introspective reasons against thinking that people would ever say that the *content* of the message they accept from a trusted source is merely that the definition of a label for their shared position has changed, such that their substantive issue positions should change. *We* (the social scientists observing other political actors) do not think that we favor a new policy because we are, say, liberals, and a liberal politician (no matter how trusted) has just told us that “liberals” favor that policy. Rather, we are liberals *to the extent that* we agree with policy positions and other elements of a liberal belief system that seem to us to be justified on independent grounds. So in the Vietnam case, even if antiwar cues had been issued by liberal politicians, we would need much more evidence than that before we concluded that the cues were the real causes of the changes in opinion rather than that these politicians conveyed persuasive messages to liberals—or that the cues coincided

with the broadcast of persuasive messages from trusted sources other than political elites.

It would be one thing, then, if there had been massive demonstrations explicitly objecting to LBJ's (or, in 1968, Hubert Humphrey's) alleged misappropriation of the term *liberal*. But a second problem with viewing ideological predispositions as fixations on what arbitrarily "goes with what" under the rubric of an ideological label in this case is that among the "avant-garde" (Zaller 1992, 209) of the antiwar movement, which seems to have been especially influential among the young, "liberalism" was seen as *complicit* in the war—and in racial segregation and poverty, too. Far from being motivated by an attempt to recapture the term *liberal*, antiwar activists tended to repudiate that very term (and all that it stood for).

Thus, it is implausible—in the absence of evidence for the proposition—that what was really happening is not that young people on the left (or ideologically innocent young people) were *persuaded* that there was something terribly wrong with the war, and with liberalism, and even with America itself—but, rather, that they had received cues telling them that "liberalism" now "meant" being antiwar. Nor does Zaller (1992, 196) seem to accept such a far-fetched theory, for he constructs a proxy for liberalism, "people's general feelings of hawkishness or dovishness," which he uses "as the measure of predispositions to support or oppose the war." But this proxy cannot tell us what *changed* people's predispositions from hawkish to dovish. Given that liberalism had, for decades, "meant" a hawkish foreign policy, dovishness—however much we now, in the wake of Vietnam, associate it with liberalism—clearly was not understood by most "liberals" themselves, prior to Vietnam, as being a position that "went with" their ideology. It is anachronistic to treat dovishness as *predisposing* young liberals to oppose the Vietnam War if, in fact, dovishness became what Converse (1964 [2006], 7) called a "crowning posture" in the liberal belief system only because people who later identified as liberals were first *persuaded* to be dovish during the Vietnam War itself.¹³

As we have seen in the case of voting in congressional elections, the "tendency" of predispositions to determine opinions if they are cued can be overcome by arguments that people find persuasive. Yet if predispositions are susceptible to short-term influences, they are "considerations" like any others—considerations that might not only be counteracted by other messages but overcome by them. In the case of

Vietnam, it appears that predispositions changed, and changed rapidly. If so, then the change must have originated in a process of persuasion, not cueing.

There must have been something that persuaded liberals to oppose the Vietnam War despite internationalist predispositions and despite pro-war cues from liberal political elites. Zaller reveals what this something might have been in chapter 2 of *Nature and Origins*, where he attributes the shift in public opinion in Vietnam to a shift in the media's overall interpretation of the war.

Persuasive Messages

However, in chapter 11, after allowing that in addition to politicians, “the media were, of course, another important source of antiwar communications,” Zaller (1992, 271) inserts a crucial caveat: “To a very considerable extent, however, media reporting reflected, as it always does, what the media’s sources were saying.” Zaller adds that “these sources were mostly in the military, the CIA, and the State Department.” In support of this version of the indexing theory, Zaller cites three authors—David Halberstam (1975 [1979]), Daniel C. Hallin (1987), and Charles Mohr (1983)—none of whose work, arguably, bears out the theory. Mohr’s brief article is discussed in an endnote.¹⁴

The most revealing of Zaller’s three sources is David Halberstam’s *The Powers That Be* (1975 [1979]). Despite Zaller’s citation of this book, however, Halberstam’s long discussion of Vietnam coverage portrays official sources as playing almost *no* role in determining Vietnam coverage. Halberstam, a *New York Times* reporter in Vietnam in 1962–63, instead spends more than two hundred pages showing the ineptitude of officials’ attempts to influence reporters (attempts that would have been unnecessary if reporters had been trying, on their own, to index the officials’ opinions). The real action, in Halberstam’s telling, was the struggle among journalists—on-site reporter versus visiting reporter, reporter versus editor, editor versus editor—about who should do the reporting, what should be reported, how it should be reported, which photos and headlines should be used, how large the photos and headlines should be. Ultimately, what was at issue was the representativeness of certain facts that reporters saw as emblematic of the situation in Vietnam, which is to say that the conflict was about the

proper interpretation of these facts. This conflict would not have been possible if the reporters and editors had indiscriminately reported whatever their sources said.

A typical example is Halberstam's (1975 [1979], 531) description of the new managing editor of the *Washington Post* in 1965, Ben Bradlee, who "prided himself on not having political attitudes and political commitments" and who "was deeply suspicious of those who did, which meant, in the world of journalism, younger reporters who might be too committed to causes, who might, in his phrase, try to put spin on a story." Bradlee repeatedly turned down requests to cover Vietnam from "reporters who had a sharp political cutting edge; the young Carl Bernstein, for example, asked to go as many as four times and was always turned down." Bradlee, according to Halberstam (*ibid.*), "was very careful whom he sent" to Vietnam, for "he did not like the reporters"—such as Halberstam—"who were causing trouble out there." Halberstam then explains that Bradlee "did not feel the special quality of Vietnam as an issue" that reporters such as Halberstam and Bernstein felt, and he identifies this special quality: "The essential issue of the war was the fact that no matter how brave the Americans were it was finally not our country, that nothing we did worked, and that the other side kept coming. . . . That was the key story," but "for a long time the *Post* missed it" because of Bradlee's limitations (*ibid.*, 532–33).

Halberstam is saying, in other words, that Bradlee and the *Post* did not report the new "civil war" and "unwinnable" frames for interpreting the war, while the rest of the elite media did—just as Zaller had said in chapter 2. In the remainder of *Nature and Origins*, however, framing effects are replaced with predisposed responses and the news media are reduced to a transcription service for politicians or government sources.

The journalists in the field, as described by Halberstam, were in fact unanimously skeptical of official sources and did whatever they could to undermine the credibility of these sources' claims. Halberstam (1975 [1979], 449) maintains that early on in the Vietnam war, no later than 1962 (when he arrived in Vietnam for his eighteen-month tour), reporters on the scene came to see "what was really going on" there—that the war was not going well for South Vietnam—"and they refused, in their reporting, to fake it,"¹⁵ despite what the official sources maintained. "Among the six or seven resident reporters in Saigon between 1961 and 1964, there was remarkably little disagreement over

the essential direction and facts of the story, over how badly the war was going,” or over “how incompetent and hostile an instrument of American policy” the family of South Vietnamese President Ngo Dinh Diem was (*ibid.*). One can therefore see that, as Zaller points out in chapter 2, even the negative reporting from Vietnam was, at first, consistent with the anti-communist frame. Diem was, for Halberstam (1964) and his colleagues, simply an inadequate means to the end of stopping the communists.

In the meantime, however, the specific negative information mediated by the journalists in these stories—that is, the information that they reported as representative of the situation in Vietnam—was so persuasive that the journalists sometimes appear to have controlled the actions of political elites, not vice versa. Negative media coverage of the Diem regime’s treatment of Vietnamese Buddhists in the late summer of 1963 appears to have caused public approval of President Kennedy’s handling of Vietnam to fall by 28 percentage points (to 56 percent), and Halberstam was the key journalistic player in producing this coverage (Moyar 2006, 245). In turn, this massive media effect—in combination with the maneuvers of the State Department’s George Ball, Averell Harriman, Roger Hilsman, and Michael Forrestal, soon joined by the new ambassador to Saigon, Henry Cabot Lodge—backed the Kennedy administration into supporting a military coup against Diem. Halberstam openly favored a coup, and Ball, Harriman, Hilsman, Forrestal, and Lodge appear to have been persuaded by Halberstam’s coverage that Diem had to go (*ibid.*, 236–38). When Kennedy realized that some of his own advisers had, against his wishes, encouraged the overthrow of Diem, he told them that they must have been paying too much attention to Halberstam’s coverage in the *New York Times*, given that Halberstam was “actually running a political campaign” (*ibid.*, 241). Far from reflecting what State Department sources were telling them, journalists were shaping what State Department sources thought, affecting not only public opinion but public policy.

Public officials may enjoy considerable autonomy from public opinion in modern democracies, for the media cannot cover even a tiny fraction of what the public officials of vast governments do (DeCanio 2006). But in this case, public officials had to deal not only with the pressure of public opinion generated by journalists, but with their own persuasion by these journalists that a deeply pessimistic prognosis for the war was accurate—as long as Diem was in office.¹⁶

Journalists are not the only people who can provide such interpretations, but they are among the most important ones by virtue of their “ostensible objectivity,” as Zaller puts it, and their willingness to tell the truth (as they see it). No matter how much political decision makers—ambassadors, bureaucrats, presidents, or voters—may know, in the abstract, that the facts don’t speak for themselves, they have little choice but to rely on what sound like plausible interpretations of facts that seem to be representative of whatever larger reality is in question. Journalists are often the sources of these interpretations by virtue of being able to publicize a credibly representative selection of facts—a selection that is inevitably framed one way rather than another.

While neither the necessary predispositions nor the necessary political elites seem to have been in place to sustain the hypothesis of ideological cueing by politicians or public officials, a modified cueing hypothesis might be sustained if we revert to Zaller’s original understanding of influential “elites” as including journalists. According to Hallin (1987, 61), a scholar of Vietnam media coverage and Zaller’s other main source for the indexing claim, “in its editorials and in the opinions of its major columnists, the *Times* broke sharply with the administration early in 1965, calling for negotiation rather than escalation and decrying the secrecy that surrounded administration policy.” This might have cued *Times* readers that “avant-garde” liberal elites were indeed turning against the war. Yet if this is the type of “cueing” that was occurring, it surely would not involve liberals saying to themselves, “I call myself a liberal and the *Times* is a liberal paper, so I must therefore turn against the war.” Instead, it would have been along the lines of, “It looks like we aren’t fighting communists, we’re merely taking sides in an internal dispute.” Hallin (*ibid.*, 91, 89) reports that a March 7, 1965 *Times* editorial asserted “that ‘there really is a species of civil war in South Vietnam,’” and that “in 1965 the history of the Vietnamese revolution began to creep occasionally into the news, and references to its nationalist roots became more common. The term *civil war* began to be used in 1965; and the term *aggression* began to appear sometimes in quotation marks, as a contention of the administration rather than a self-evident fact.”

In Hallin’s telling, the new interpretation of the war was invoked quite suddenly in 1965, just when Zaller’s opinion data about well-informed liberals, and about the decline in prowar stories after 1965,

would lead us to look for the sudden appearance of a new independent variable.

Studying Persuasive Messages

In noticing the new civil-war frame, Hallin departs not only from the indexing hypothesis but from the major tool in its methodological arsenal, and the one Hallin usually employs: quantitative media analysis, i.e., correlating story counts with the positions taken by public officials and politicians. For the most part, this is also Zaller's approach to media-content analysis. But sheer numbers of "antiwar" vs. "prowar" stories tell us next to nothing about their actual content. We cannot know which frames were being used in the stories, or how persuasive these frames might have seemed at the time, without qualitatively analyzing the content of the stories.

Zaller (1992, 188) recognizes this. Thus, he goes beyond counts of prowar/antiwar stories to discover that "early antiwar stories . . . reported difficulties in the conduct of the war that might have been interpreted as reasons for strengthening the U.S. commitment." This would explain why the steadily rising "antiwar" tenor of news coverage did not affect public opinion until 1965, when a new frame was introduced. However, this instance of qualitative content analysis is at odds with the quantitative approach to media-content analysis that is used throughout *Nature and Origins*—and as this particular example shows, it can render quantitative analysis (the steady rise in the number of antiwar stories before 1965) irrelevant. This is because quantitative analysis necessarily ignores the heterogeneous content and persuasiveness of different "messages." And that is the main problem with using the indexing hypothesis—even to the extent that it is accurate—not to explain media coverage per se, but to explain media coverage that influences public opinion.

Bennett (1990, 107), who originated the hypothesis, may be able to show that an index of what government officials were saying at a given time can be correlated with the statistical distribution of *types or sources* of messages in certain forms of routine daily coverage. That is, if officials are promoting the war, but legislators are opposing it, the division of opinion might be reflected in news stories reporting war-related developments in Washington. This would not be surprising, since two

conventions of the news are that reporters, as distinguished from commentators, are supposed to offer opinions only from the mouths of others; and that reporters are to present all sides of an issue. But the indexing hypothesis tells us nothing about the ability of routine coverage in general, or of any particular story or message contained in routine coverage, to overcome or change predispositions. If we are trying to understand not the distribution of words and images routinely published or broadcast by the media, but the impact of mediated words and images on public opinion in a particular case, we need to know the actual content of the messages the words and images conveyed. And we need to know the context in which this content was interpreted, first by the journalists, and then—somehow—by the audience, if we are to be able to judge how persuasive the content might have been. At this point we would need, in addition to qualitative media-coverage analysis, a qualitative theory of opinion change in a given context. (A general theory would be superfluous, and there is no reason to think that general laws or tendencies apply.)

Supposing that a new frame is persuasive to a journalist's audience given what the audience already (thinks that it) knows about the issue, the information conveying this frame would be more important than the previously received information that is overturned by the new frame—no matter how many messages an audience member had received and accepted that had been consistent with the old interpretive frame. Yet in the RAS model, every received and accepted message that is accessible to memory becomes an equally weighted consideration, with just as much persuasiveness as any other. This makes the RAS model inherently unsuited to explaining persuasion. "Attitude change . . . cannot be understood within the RAS model as a conversion experience, the replacement of one crystallized opinion structure by another. It must instead be understood as a change in *the balance of positive and negative considerations relating to a given issue*" (Zaller 1992, 118, *emph. added*). This presupposes that people treat each newly received and accepted message as another datum with exactly the same weight as each of the data previously received and accepted. The only question is whether the new datum is sorted into the "positive" or "negative" category.

Zaller (1992, 274) notes that this aspect of the RAS model is unrealistic. He points out that different "individuals who are exposed to the same message may, if they take notice of it, perceive it differently," and that "differences in reception (given equal attentiveness to the same

message) will depend on people's previously existing ideas (or schemata) which may differ both in content and degree of development across individuals." Zaller therefore concludes that the RAS model, "as presently constituted, makes no allowance for" heterogeneously persuasive considerations, and that this is a problem. Similarly, in discussing the 1996 chapter's quantitative content analysis of magazine coverage of candidates for the 1984 Democratic presidential nomination, Zaller (1996, 43) writes that in this analysis, "differences in the intrinsic appeal or persuasiveness of different paragraphs are entirely neglected. . . . About the only thing that can be said in favor of the media data," he concludes, "is that they are in quantitative form and hence usable for testing a model" (*ibid.*). To study the heterogeneous persuasiveness of different stories, we need qualitative content analysis.

Thus, in judging the success of *Nature and Origins* in proving the importance of cueing, we must keep in mind that the alternative hypothesis—the persuasion-by-media-frames hypothesis that Zaller suggests in chapter 2—has *not* been tested. The data needed to *confirm* the RAS and indexing hypotheses, being quantitative, are incapable of falsifying the alternative hypothesis, which is inherently qualitative. Yet, as we have already seen, the quantitative data seem, if anything, to falsify the applicability of the cueing model to the case of Vietnam: The necessary cues and the necessary predispositions are missing for what the data show as the timing of the change in well-informed liberal opinion. Also lacking is an explanation for why there is no correlation between public opinion and steadily growing negative media coverage during the first five years of the decade, or between this coverage and political cues.

All that the cueing hypothesis has in its favor is that it can be tested quantitatively. But even if we assume that the dependent variable, public opinion, needs to be quantitative, such that survey data are essential to gauging it—although that is not at all certain, given Zaller's well-grounded doubts about the ability of survey responses to tell us about opinions that might result in political *actions* (voting, protesting, etc.) (Zaller 1992, chs. 4–5; Zaller 2013)—there is no reason that the independent variable also has to be quantitative. In reality, people *do* have conversion experiences caused by a single idea, conversation, or book (consider the Bible, the political works of Noam Chomsky, or the novels of Ayn Rand). Even when predispositions (or convictions) are formed more gradually, it is implausible to think that suddenly the pile of

considerations on the side of the scale favoring the new conviction is so much *larger* than the pile on the other side that the scale is thrown away and the individual becomes incapable of seeing the side in which she used to believe. It is more likely that a new consideration is so substantively different from old ones that it provides a plausible new interpretation of a great many deal of them—outweighing all of them combined, let alone any one of them—because it casts them all in a new and persuasive light that, in turn, makes incoming information that might falsify this interpretation suddenly seem implausible.¹⁷ If this powerful new interpretation is exogenous to the individual (mediated to her), then it stands to reason that we should be less concerned with quantities of mediated or received messages than with their interpretive, confirmatory, and falsifying properties, given a specific cultural context.

For example, almost anyone from Zaller's generation (and mine) will remember a particularly chilling Vietnam story broadcast in 1965—a single story that left a lasting impression on those who saw it, and was so powerful that it might well, in fact, have triggered a conversion experience for many. This was Morley Safer's coverage of U.S. Marines destroying the village of Cam Ne, which included footage “of a U.S. marine using his cigarette lighter to burn a Vietnamese peasant's thatched roof hut” (Zaller 1992, 316). Safer's story may well have been more persuasive to many people than hour upon hour of Fulbright hearings or page after page of *Times* reports about the dubious claims of “administration sources.” Indeed, it is quite realistic to think that for many, Safer's story might have been more persuasive than all the other Vietnam stories up to that moment, pro and anti, put together. Why? Because the casualness of the Marines as they went about destroying Cam Ne, oblivious to the wails of old women and small children, suggested that this was a routine operation, in turn implying that the war was not being fought to defend innocent Vietnamese from communist enslavement, but was either a mindless enterprise or a malignant one that was destroying those very innocents. Yet a quantitative content analysis that produced counts of interchangeable stories would classify the Safer story as merely another “anti,” no more persuasive than any other.

As a point of comparison, Hallin's (1987, 43–48) detailed analysis of media coverage of the fall of the Diem regime does not even mention Halberstam's reporting, since Hallin's concern, motivated by the indexing hypothesis, is to establish the type of mediated messages that

were, at any given time, “the norm.” By focusing on reporting that is, by virtue of its familiarity, *less* likely to be persuasive, Hallin overlooks the stories that actually mattered in 1963.¹⁸ Now Hallin (*ibid.*, 132–33) does notice the Safer story because it generated an immense controversy. Yet he dismisses its importance, and the importance of later stories showing U.S. atrocities, because they were “by no means typical of coverage in the period before the Tet offensive” of 1968 (*ibid.*, 133). We might as well note that it is not typical for presidents to be assassinated: This does not erase the trauma when they are.

Quantitative analysis is a tool that is sometimes appropriate, but here its effect is to trivialize.

Arguing the World

Hallin (1987, 208) complains that during the entire period of U.S. involvement in Vietnam, “the word ‘*imperialism*’” was never uttered on television (by an American). But Hallin seems to have gotten from someplace the idea that that word *should* have been uttered. If he did not get this idea from the mass media, then from where did he get it? In answering this question (in the abstract, knowing nothing about Hallin), we pursue a *Verstehende* and qualitative approach to the generation of opinion.

Not all interpretive frames come from the mass media, after all, even if the mass media can contribute to their plausibility. Interpretive frames that are mediated through other cultural channels can ultimately be influential on public opinion, too. For example, the application of the imperialism frame to Vietnam was, of course, a staple of North Vietnamese propaganda, but the use of this interpretive frame by Americans may have been pioneered in 1964 by the Progressive Labor Party (Sale 1973, 122), a small faction of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) that exerted a disproportionate influence on the antiwar movement. SDS was the most important vehicle for popularizing New Left ideas among the young, and Zaller (1992, 176), as we have seen, finds that young “liberals” were the most “predisposed” to turn against the war in 1965–66.

The key distinction between the Old and the New Left was that New Leftists repudiated Soviet “socialism” as authoritarian. This allowed them to oppose American “corporate liberalism,” i.e., the capitalist status quo, without being fairly accused of favoring communism. Another effect of the New Left’s repudiation of the Soviet-style regimes of the Second

World was to broaden its critique of the First World, targeting not just wage slavery and the profit motive but poverty, consumerism, massified culture, bureaucracy, and militarism. Bureaucracy and militarism were particularly important because they were features of the Soviet system, too, heightening the moral equivalence of the First and Second Worlds—and, at the same time, pointing toward the Third World as a possible source of salvation. This role for the Third World, in turn, suggested that the relationship between it and the First and Second Worlds must be antagonistic. Thus, “imperialism” seemed a plausible interpretation of the relationship between the West and the East, or the North and the South.

The foreign-policy implications of opposition to U.S. militarism and imperialism were anathema to liberal internationalists, but this means that the New Left is exactly what we need: something to explain why a new, *anti*-internationalist conviction (or predisposition) became persuasive on the left. For if we are to explain the righteous indignation of so many millions of opponents of the war, it is probably insufficient to refer to the *New York Times*’s 1965 framing of the Vietnam conflict as a civil war, even if an implication of this frame was that the war was unwinnable by the United States. To many opponents, the war also represented something sinister or pathological about U.S. foreign policy and, increasingly, American society and culture.

Taken together, the ideas of the New Left surely can be said to have constituted a *new* ideology. The “creative synthesizers” of ideologies, according to Converse (1964 [2006], 8, 66), constitute the “minuscule proportion of any population” whose activities are usually studied under the rubric of “the history of ideas.” While the average American voter was not reading Franz Fanon, Herbert Marcuse, C. Wright Mills, or the early Marx in 1965, thousands of students were. If cues from elite politicians or government officials cannot explain what happened in the 1960s, perhaps our definition of “elites” is too restrictive, even if it includes journalists.

Were we to integrate the history of ideas into our understanding of public opinion, it would allow us to try to trace messages “down” from creative ideological synthesizers to their followers, the ideologues, including political activists. Public-opinion research has traditionally picked up the story only there, tracing elements of ideological “belief systems” as they trickle down from ideologues to the relatively uninformed public—because, to some extent, survey research can

capture this trickle-down. But a further vertical integration of our picture of public opinion formation, uniting it with intellectual history, is logical if we want to explain ideological *changes* (and other important political phenomena)—especially in a pivotal epoch such as that of the Vietnam War—without surreally abstracting from the intellectualism, passion, dogmatism, and violence that may accompany these changes.

However, to move in this ideational direction, we would have to blur or even efface the lines between stable long-term predispositions and short-term persuasion by mediators of reality—not just journalists, but ideology synthesizers. A student who one day is merely “liberal,” the next day reads *The Wretched of the Earth* or *The Authoritarian Personality* or hears about American imperialism at a teach-in,¹⁹ a few weeks later sees the Safer story on TV (or coverage of the My Lai massacre, or of a naked child running in terror from a napalm attack), and the next day tells a survey researcher that she opposes the war—this respondent *might* be said to have been “predisposed” to an antiwar response by the readings, or by the lecture, or even by her prevenient “liberalism.” But if it is her liberalism that is the predisposition, then we have not explained why her liberalism, but not others’, was “cued” by the Safer story—or, more accurately, why she, but not they, found its message to be a persuasive argument against the war, one that represented the larger reality of it, not merely a tragic anomaly in an otherwise noble conflict. On the other hand, if it is the reading or the teach-in that is said to predispose her to interpret the Safer story as a confirmation of American imperialism, militarism, or monstrosity, then the predisposition itself was a product of persuasive messages (however inchoately processed), and the messages were received from non-journalistic cultural sources. And if political theorists such as Marcuse or activists such as those in SDS can shape predispositions, why cannot journalists do so as well—if their stories are persuasive enough?

A Future for Media Research

Bartels (1993, 267) once complained about “one of the most notable embarrassments of modern social science,” the paucity of media research in political science:

The pervasiveness of the mass media and their virtual monopoly over the presentation of many kinds of information must suggest to reasonable observers that what these media say and how they say it has enormous social and political consequences. Nevertheless, the scholarly literature has been much better at refuting, qualifying, and circumscribing the thesis of media impact than at supporting it.

However, the absence of research on entertainment media may be even more embarrassing, since we know how much attention most people pay to this type of culture relative to the news. That massive *news*-media effects can be demonstrated by Zaller, despite the chronic inattention of the American public to the news, suggests that cultural sources commanding greater attention from the public might produce even more massive effects—although these would presumably be harder to detect, because they would take place over the long term and would shape inchoate attitudes about the way politics, government, and the economy function or the traits shared by members of various groups.

Consider the example of changing attitudes toward homosexuals—a classic “values” issue if ever there was one. The attraction of values to political scientists is that precisely because they do *not* entail factual political knowledge (which tends to be scanty among most citizens) or interpretations of empirical realities, they seem to represent stable and somehow self-generating, self-contained predispositions, amenable to empirical analysis of the RAS variety, as Goren’s (2013) symposium paper confirms. As such, they should be impervious to short-term cultural influences. Yet in the last fifteen years, attitudes toward homosexuality among the American people have changed dramatically.

Starting in July 1994, the Pew Center asked whether “homosexuality is a way of life that should be accepted by society, or homosexuality is a way of life that should be discouraged by society.” From 1994 through 1997, 48–50 percent of respondents said it should be discouraged while 44–46 percent said it should be accepted; no trend was apparent. However, between October 1997 and the next survey, in August 1999, the first tolerant majority appeared, with the proportion advocating acceptance rising from 46 to 49 percent and the proportion advocating discouragement declining from 48 to 44 percent. The two numbers have continued to head in opposite directions since then, with acceptance reaching 57 percent and discouragement 36 percent in March 2013 (Bowman et al. 2013, 8).

An obvious hypothesis is that cultural influences are responsible. In the epilogue of *Nature and Origins*, Zaller discussed media coverage of homosexuality in pursuit of the now-abandoned hypothesis that experts might be the ultimate determinants of public opinion through their influence on political and journalistic elites. In the process, Zaller (1992, Fig. 12.1) showed that the tone of TV news coverage of homosexuality changed from negative to positive in 1974, two decades too soon to explain the recent shift in public opinion toward gays. An alternative hypothesis would start with the fact that the entertainment media began featuring “normal” or admirable gay characters in the late 1990s. Historians of popular culture would note that in the 1997–98 season of “Ellen,” the popular comedienne and actress Ellen DeGeneres came out; and that “Will and Grace,” featuring an utterly “normal” gay character, debuted in September 1998.

This is one hypothesis to explain one finding in one survey, and quantitative researchers can certainly think of counter-hypotheses and methods of testing them against each other. The broader thesis of the impact of the entertainment media could likewise use countable items such as the number of sympathetic gay characters in movies and television programs, the box-office and Nielsen success of these vehicles, and so on to test the entertainment media as independent variables that change people’s predispositions—even their values. However, not every explanation for people’s politically relevant predispositions can be so easily quantified, especially if they are built up over many years. Paul Lazarsfeld (1948, 255) acknowledged in the early days of public-opinion research that “short-term investigations will never be able to trace the way in which, over a lifetime, the mass media accentuate for some people parts of the social world and conceal them from others.” This should have been taken as an invitation to undertake long-term research on media effects, but quantitative methods lend themselves to short-term research, and it is difficult to escape the conclusion that in this case, scholars chose research topics based on the precision of the available methods rather than the significance of the topics those methods could illuminate.

The same holds if the dependent variable is not mass opinion—such a tempting subject because statistically tractable survey results are available—but the opinions held by important political actors such as legislators, legislative staff members, judges, judicial clerks, presidents, executive appointees, and civil servants; and if the independent variables

are not just these political actors' exposure to news and entertainment media but, as Converse (1964 [2006], 66) suggests, to high culture, on which "the broad contours of elite decisions over time can depend in a vital way."

The Object of Political Science

Only an exceedingly narrow approach to political science would treat "science" as equivalent to quantitative testing. The alternative, qualitative testing, is performed routinely in disciplines such as history, including the intellectual history done by many political theorists. In interpreting what Rousseau meant when he wrote that the general will is always right, there is abundant textual and contextual evidence against which various hypotheses are tested.

If we are interested in the origin of political opinions, we are doing intellectual history, whether we know it or not. There is a qualitative dimension even to coding stories as "prowar" or "antiwar." The quantitative imperative felt by most political scientists, however, demands that interpretation stop with blanket judgments of this sort, ignoring differences in content and persuasiveness. (Imagine the foolishness of trying to infer Rousseau's meaning from the number of times he uses the term *general will*, regardless of what he says about the general will in a given sentence or the relationship of that statement to his argument as a whole.) The ultimate criterion of science is openness to evidence. Insisting that only quantifiable, homogeneous units count as evidence is utterly unscientific and can only retard the search for an understanding of why people believe what they do.

A different kind of narrowness—this one, having to do with the "political" in political science—would afflict us if we were to insist that people's politically relevant beliefs must originate with politicians or public officials. Whatever the advisability of the polity/society dichotomy, we should recognize that it is a mere conceptual construct. In reality, "political" actors are members of both their polities and their societies. If we want to understand their opinions, it is absurd to restrict our attention to influences that originate in the "political" realm, narrowly defined. Thus, if we are to pursue the ideational, epistemic agenda Zaller sets forth in chapter 2 of *Nature and Origins*, it might be helpful to abandon political scientists' peculiar notion that "the news" is

coextensive with the total “information” environment. Most children—even those who grow up to become journalists (or political activists, or even experts)—watch a lot less news than cartoons, movies, dramas, and comedies. They also read novels and they go to school, where they read (*inter alia*) textbooks. There is no reason to think that people’s developing political beliefs, even predispositions, are impervious to the ideas about society, human nature, and so on that are contained in these sources.

Public-opinion researchers who recognized the unnecessary constriction of the subfield’s dominant assumptions about the sources of “political” opinions could produce major changes in political science as a whole, for their work would tend to divert some attention from the reality that has for so long preoccupied us—the distribution of power—in favor of a focus on the culturally mediated realities that make power distributions important. Power is useless if it is not used, and as Zaller (1992, 328) puts it, “political information precedes action.” This is a dictum that applies logically not only to ordinary citizens but to those who hold greater political power. If we want to understand what is *done* with political power, we have to understand which information, and which interpretations of information, influence those with political power of various degrees, from voters on up. Why do conservatives, liberals, libertarians, and anarchists believe in the “crowning postures” of their ideologies? Why did Republican activists embrace wage and price controls in 1971? Why did people turn against the war in Vietnam in the particular ways that they did, with such decisive effects on subsequent U.S. foreign policy? These are epistemic and ideational questions, but with rare exceptions, political scientists do not study the nature and origins of political actors’ information and their interpretations of it.

I have been critical of the RAS model for the same reasons Zaller (1992, 274) was critical of it: It ignores “differences in reception” of a message, which may “depend on people’s previously existing ideas (or schemata).” Ideas or schemata may, in turn, “differ both in content and degree of development across individuals.” The RAS model also treats predispositions as if they were fixed, even though “it is likely that, over the long run, the elite ideas that one internalizes have some effect on one’s values and other predispositions” (*ibid.*, 23). And I have criticized the indexing model of media content, which is so amenable to being coupled with the RAS model of opinion formation, because it, too, ignores the different ideas and schemata, frames, or interpretations that are conveyed by those who mediate reality to us.

Thus, I have suggested a research program that is consistent with the second chapter of *Nature and Origins*. It would take account not only of the differences in citizens' different *levels* of information, as all post-Converse public-opinion researchers do; but also of the heterogeneous content of the information they receive and of the interpretations that make sense of it. As Zaller (1992, 7) put it,

The information that reaches the public is never a full record of important events and developments in the world. It is, rather, a highly selective and stereotyped view of what has taken place. It could hardly be otherwise.

The same Lippmannite considerations apply to all members of the political system: the mediators of the world and those to whom they mediate it, not just ordinary members of the public but political elites. So I have followed Converse in pointing, at least hypothetically, to some of the high- and low-cultural sources of selective and stereotyped information, sources that go beyond the generally political focus of journalists.

It was a given for the Zaller who wrote chapter 2 of *Nature and Origins* that *somebody* screens and interprets political realities for us. Even though he did not pursue the point in the chapters that followed, nothing in those chapters showed that Zaller's initial assumption was wrong, suggesting an exciting ideational alternative to the doldrums in which public-opinion research is often sunk. The more conventional, power-oriented interests-and-groups agenda that Zaller (2013) now proposes is not incompatible with his ideational agenda of 1992 and 1996; the ideational alternative simply deals with a different and, arguably, more essential topic: the reasons for mass *and* elite commitments to using power in particular ways, whether these commitments are overt, ideological, and rigid or tacit, latent, and sporadically expressed.

The fruits of such an agenda cannot, of course, be predicted in advance. But for those who doubt them, it seems to be worth noting that the agenda has never been pursued, not even in Zaller's landmark book.

NOTES

1. This is the view that was urged on political scientists by V. O. Key, Jr. (1964, 394): "The picture of the press collectively as the wielder of great power on its own initiative does not fit the facts"—about which, apparently, politicians and government officials, who constantly seek to influence journalists, are gravely

mistaken. The basis for Key's assertion, however, was that political scientists had done so little research on the question that there was no evidence of media effects (*ibid.*, 345), which certainly does not justify his confident assurances that these effects do not exist (*ibid.*, 344). Similar nonfindings (*ibid.*, 396) support Key's claim that "the tone and quality of the content of the media tend to be mightily influenced, if not fixed, by those who manufacture news" (*ibid.*, 395), by which Key meant advertisers (*ibid.*, 396). However hard-headed this might sound, it is contradicted by the information-selection and interpretive role of journalists, at least according to the Lippmannite opening pages of Zaller's book. In turn, Key opens his book with a two-paragraph dismissal of Lippmann that fails even to mention the questions of information selection and interpretation (*ibid.*, 5). In effect, the puzzle I aim to solve is how it came to be that by the end of his own book, Zaller (1992, 319) was quoting Key's dismissal of media power (1964, 394) approvingly, despite having provided no evidence that the Lippmannite view of journalistic autonomy presented at the beginning of *Nature and Origins* was defective.

2. Lippmann 1922 [1997], 54; James 1890 [1918], 488.
3. Activists are a special case. They can communicate one on one, and a single conversation may be much more effective than a single newspaper article. But Zaller (1992, 273n5) points out that personal conversation about politics consists largely of relaying or reacting to information someone has received from journalists. On the other hand, activists can supply a new interpretation of mass-mediated news, as we shall see in the case of Vietnam.
4. However, Zaller (1992, 23) adds, to this otherwise clearly "epistemic" statement, an assertion about cues: "... and on which partisan elites are associated with which positions."
5. As well as "race"—which, however, surely cannot be supposed to be a source of predispositions unless it collapses into "inherited personality factors" (Zaller 1992, 23). In thinking about predispositions and race, Zaller drops his customary caution and conflates statistical predictors of political attitudes, such as demographic factors, with causal sources of these attitudes. This is, to be sure, a common practice, but it flies in the face of Zaller's interpretivist understanding of politics, and therefore tends to neutralize any role for mediated facts and understandings in shaping the opinions of demographic "groups." On the origins of this practice in the functionalist sociological assumptions of the Columbia school, see Friedman 2013.
6. Subject to caveats that may be warranted by Larry M. Bartels's contribution (2013) below.
7. If they forget this information after the election, they are reminded of it by the wording of the post-election NES survey that Zaller (1992, 229) uses.
8. Zaller (1992, 233) concludes that "there is only slight evidence of the nonmonotonicity that arises from the heightened partisan resistance of the highly aware."
9. Indeed, in the penultimate chapter of the book (ch. 11), which summarizes the argument and evidence presented earlier, Zaller (1992, 274) says that according to the Resistance Axiom, "people can resist persuasion *only* to the extent that

- they have acquired an appropriate cueing message” (even while he admits that he has provided no direct evidence that cueing information, rather than “something else,” explains resistance [ibid., 275]). This suggests that somehow persuasive messages are powerless in the face of a cued predisposition. Perhaps Zaller means that inertial considerations must first have passed the test of having been consistent with partisan predispositions; after thus having been accepted, they can, in the future, exert a cumulative partisan force of their own, even absent new partisan cues or messages. And perhaps countervailing messages sneak in before a cue or contextual information alerts the citizen that these messages should be rejected on partisan grounds. In the case of congressional voting, for example, even well-informed defectors may have received the decisive pro-incumbent messages before they were alerted of the incumbent’s party affiliation (in the voting booth), so that the messages remain in their heads as considerations even though they would not have been accepted if the voter had realized that the incumbent was from the other party. However, there is no evidence for any of this. The fact that well-informed partisans defect less often than worse-informed partisans do is fully consistent with the possibility that people treat their predispositions as just one of many considerations, and that more persuasive considerations may move them to disregard their predispositions in a given case. As far as I can tell, none of the research claiming to show mindless partisanship in *Nature and Origins* and in public-opinion research generally is immune from cognitivist reinterpretation of this sort, even when the research purports to show experimentally that people blindly adhere to prior opinions (predispositions, in effect) in the face of counterevidence (e.g., Taber and Lodge 2006); see Friedman 2012 and Ross 2012.
10. Zaller’s data (Fig. 9.2) show that the change occurred at some point between 1964 and the end of 1966, but the only antiwar cue from a political leader that he mentions is the Fulbright hearings held in 1966; this appears to be the basis of his assertion that liberals began to turn against the war in 1966 (rather than 1965).
 11. During World War I, of course, liberalism in the modern sense was called Progressivism.
 12. This was not Converse’s view, although it is often taken to be. As he put it, bundles of issue positions are held together in ideologies by interpretations of “crowning postures—like premises about survival of the fittest in the spirit of social Darwinism”—that “serve as a sort of glue to bind together many more specific attitudes and beliefs.” These crowning postures, he maintained, “are of prime centrality in the belief system as a whole” (Converse 1964 [2006], 7).
 13. The hawk/dove measure is based on responses to such questions as:

Which do you think is the better way for us to keep the peace—by having a very strong military so that other countries won’t attack us, or by working out our disagreements at the bargaining table? (Zaller 1992, 196; cf. Hurwitz and Peffley 1987, 1115)

This is precisely the type of question of which the Michigan school—including Converse and culminating in Zaller—has taught us to be wary. As Zaller (1992, 76) puts it:

Most people really aren't sure what their opinions are on most political matters. . . . They're not sure because there are few occasions, outside of a standard interview situation, in which they are called upon to formulate and express political opinions. So, when confronted by rapid-fire questions in a public opinion survey, they make up attitude reports as best they can as they go along. But because they are hurrying, they are heavily influenced by whatever ideas happen to be at the top of their minds.

In the context of 1965 or 1966, even if a respondent who had genuinely internationalist commitments had recently heard something negative about the Vietnam war, this negative consideration could prompt a dovish top-of-the-head survey response, *regardless* of how the same respondent might have answered the question in a survey taken in, say, 1959 or 1960. Therefore, when Zaller finds that support for the war among well-informed "doves" took a nosedive in 1965–66, it may simply mean that some relatively well-informed survey respondents had just heard bad news about the war—and it may mean nothing more. That is, Zaller's measure of declining support for the war on the basis of "dovishness" may simply represent the relative rise in bad news about the war reflected in Zaller's Figure 9.1a; whoever had heard such news might then be prompted not only to respond that they were against the war, but that, in the abstract, negotiation is a better way to "keep the peace" than is maintaining a strong military. By the same token, those whom Zaller classifies as highly informed "conservatives," i.e., "hawks," may merely be relatively well-informed survey respondents who happened have heard good news about the war recently, and thus answered that they favored both the war and a strong military—but were not "hawks" in any deeper, predispositional sense.

Therefore, what is being measured may not reflect *either* ideological predispositions or hawk-dove "values." Instead, Zaller's hawk/dove measure of liberal opposition to the war may merely tap whatever culturally mediated messages might simultaneously have prompted a particular respondent to oppose this particular war at the moment of the survey *and, for that reason*, to answer the hawk/dove questions dovishly—because those messages happened to have been at the top of his or her head.

The question remains, however, why highly informed liberals in the period turned against the war, because Zaller (1992, 209) says that the opinions of liberals identified by a feeling thermometer followed the same patterns that he puts under the hawk/dove rubric. I am questioning only that rubric in this note.

14. Zaller (1992, 271) quotes Charles Mohr, a *Time* and then *New York Times* reporter in Vietnam, writing defensively that "the reporters did not invent the somber information that sometimes appeared in their stories." But the same passage from Mohr inadvertently suggests that the reporters did *select* that information: The reporters, he writes, were aware of disputes between, on the one hand, optimistic "senior officials" in the military who "were reporting to Washington on the programs they themselves were administering;" and, on the other hand, pessimistic "brilliant young field officers, as exemplified by the late

John Paul Vann,” who “increasingly turned to the journalists” to express their disagreement with the senior officials. Even in protesting the journalists’ innocence of *fabrication*, Mohr demonstrates that journalists saw their optimistic sources as self-serving propaganda pushers and their pessimistic sources as brave truth tellers. Halberstam’s account of the resulting coverage confirms that the pessimists, in seeking out the journalists, were pushing on an open door. In any case, there is no justification for treating Mohr’s account as supporting the indexing hypothesis; that journalists were aware of the conflict between optimistic and pessimistic sources does not show that they treated both types of source as equally authoritative.

15. This is not necessarily to endorse Halberstam’s self-congratulatory judgments about the accuracy of his and his colleagues’ reporting. For a skeptical account, see Moyar 2006, *passim*.
16. “A number of officials have recalled being ‘fed up with the ‘light at the end of the tunnel’ stuff’ in official reports from Saigon, and becoming ‘more persuaded by what I saw on the tube and in the papers’” (Hallin 1987, 170).
17. Why a particular person finds a particular interpretation persuasive would have to be a function of what previous interpretations she had encountered and what previous information the new interpretation seems to explain so well.
18. Reporters do not fight to “break” a story because they are trying to echo the pack (or repeat official news releases); they do it because an unusual story commands unusual attention.
19. In the spring of 1965, there were hundreds of teach-ins across the United States (Sale 1973, 184). The Safer story was broadcast on August 5.

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