

Understanding Public Opinion

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12 Manipulating Public Opinion

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In an essay concerned with the relationship between public opinion and policymaking, Benjamin Page (1994) recounted Lance Bennett's (1989) "gloomy conjecture" that about one-third of the time, American policymaking is the result of a "bottom-up" process, wherein public officials are responsive to public opinion; about one-third of the time public officials ignore public opinion; and in the remaining third of the time, public opinion is managed or manipulated to ensure that the public supports policies that are pursued by public officials for reasons other than "the will of the people." Bennett's pessimistic division of the possible links between public opinion and policy may or may not be an accurate parsing of political reality, but it does provide a useful framework for making sense of these complex, interactive relationships. Research providing support for the first causal linkage—a systematic relationship between public opinion and policymaking, such that public opinion exerts a substantial influence on policy—is plentiful and increasingly sophisticated, yielding a portrait of representation that is generally consistent with normative theories of democratic responsiveness (Erikson, Wright, and McIver 1989, 1993; Page and Shapiro 1983, 1992; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995). However, the presence of democratic responsiveness—public officials responding to the will of the people when formulating policy—does not rule out the other two possibilities. Much less is known about the conditions under which political elites ignore public opinion (Bennett's 1989 argument is that they instead attend to institutional voices). The goal of this chapter is to provide a selective overview of theory and research on the third possibility, namely elite manipulation of public opinion.

The consideration of elite manipulation of public opinion in effect treats *public opinion* as the dependent variable in the analytic framework (Margolis and Mauser 1989), rather than as the independent variable posited in the democratic responsiveness relationship. Of course, a complex construct like public opinion necessarily results from multiple factors, including early socialization forces (Sears 1983), personal experiences, and political and social events such as war, economic fluctuations, domestic crises, and so on (Page and Shapiro 1992). This chapter focuses on a specific set of factors that have an influence on public opin-

move public opinion in a direction that serves the official's own purposes.¹

A brief clarification of the core concepts is critical. Following V. O. Key, I adopt an expansive view of *public opinion* as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed" (1961, 14). These "opinions" can be about public policy alternatives, but also include attitudes and beliefs about public officials, political institutions, and normative principles. *Manipulation* is a term that often has pejorative connotations, with the implication that the act of manipulation entails unfair or deceptive strategies. But the meaning of the term is actually broader than that. *Webster's* defines the verb *to manipulate* as "to manage or utilize skillfully; to control or play upon by artful, unfair, or insidious means especially to one's own advantage; to change by artful or unfair means so as to serve one's purpose" (*Webster's Online Dictionary*). In short, manipulation can be either "artful" or "unfair." If it is artful, observers may feel admiration; if it is unfair, the reaction may be outrage. I adopt this broader linguistic usage by reviewing theory and research more generally directed toward understanding how public officials strive to influence public opinion through rhetorical strategies. In the concluding section, I devote special attention to rhetorical manipulation that involves deliberate deception and misleading the public.

In calling upon the relevant literature, I have chosen to focus on three research domains that illustrate in a convincing manner, with a variety of methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks, the central claim that political rhetoric can and does have systematic consequences for public opinion. The three domains are presidential strategies of "going public" (Kernell 1997); Lawrence Jacobs and Robert Shapiro's (2000) analysis of "crafted talk" as a strategy to change public opinion; and experimental research on the effectiveness of political explanations to manage the damage associated with political predicaments (McGraw 2001). In the final section, I consider the occurrence and normative implications of the deliberate use of deception in political rhetoric.

Presidential Rhetoric and *Going Public*

Walter Lippmann (1922) was one of the first scholars to argue that politicians attempt to "manufacture consent" through strategic appeals to the public. Samuel Kernell provides a prominent and detailed analysis of strategic presidential practices in his model of *going public*, which he defines as "a class of activities that presidents engage in as they promote themselves and their policies before the American public" (1997, ix). These strategies include televised press conferences, special prime-time television addresses, radio addresses, and travel to make local appearances. Contemporary American presidents have made increasing use of these communication strategies, starting with the Eisenhower administration. Certainly, advances in communication and travel technology account for some of these

trends, but Kernell argues that the strategy of "going public" is also fundamentally rooted in the declining influence of the major parties in American politics. In the absence of strong party loyalties and collective political interests, the president is uniquely poised to act as an individual to mobilize public opinion in support of his positions, with the ultimate goal of increasing his chances of success in Washington.

In short, influencing public opinion is the linchpin in securing support in Congress for presidential policy initiatives. Kernell argues that five conditions are required for these dynamics to be effective. First, a necessary prerequisite is that the president is generally popular, enjoying some measure of public support.² Second, the president must accurately communicate his preferences to the public. Third, citizens evaluate the policy initiative according to their general evaluation of the president (which is why general popularity is necessary). Fourth, citizens communicate support for the president's initiative to their elected representatives, who, fifth, strategically align their preferences with the president in the service of electoral security.

As should be obvious, the process of going public is complex and ultimate success is contingent on a number of specific steps. Empirical evidence for some of the steps in the model exists, but there are still many open questions. Three sets of findings regarding the president's ability to lead public opinion appear to be robust. First, presidents are able to influence their general popularity ratings through dramatic political events such as travel and making speeches, but those boosts tend to be short-lived (MacKuen 1983; Ragsdale 1984, 1987) and contingent upon the type of speech and trip (Brace and Hinckley 1992). Second, popular presidents can sway public opinion on specific policies, but unpopular presidents have little influence (Edwards 1983; Kernell 1997; Mondak 1993; Page and Shapiro 1984, 1992; Sigelman 1980). Third, presidents can shape the public's views about the most important political problems, with the president's ability to shape the public agenda apparently not being dependent upon popularity (Behr and Iyengar 1985; Cohen 1995).

An important practical and normative question that follows from these analyses is, What matters more for sustaining the president's standing with the public—rhetoric or actual political performance (that is, satisfying political and economic conditions), public relations or political substance? Kernell's conclusion is that "both do" (1997, 241), a conclusion that is supported by experimental evidence. That is, systematic and independent manipulation of rhetorical strategies and policy consequences—"what they say and what they do"—in an experimental context revealed that both sets of factors have a statistically significant and substantively meaningful impact on evaluations of public officials (McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995). The implication here is clear: modern presidents must work hard to solve political problems *and* be skilled practitioners of public relations in order to sustain public support for their policy goals. A final note: Kernell's analysis is explicitly concerned with presidential strategies, and presidents have certainly been the earliest and foremost practi-

tioners of “going public.” However, other public officials such as members of Congress have come to recognize the power and necessity of enlisting public support for their policy initiatives (see, for example, T. Cook 1989), a trend that suggests that the practice of “going public” will increase in a variety of political arenas.

Simulated Responsiveness and *Crafted Talk*

The negative interpretation of the democratic responsiveness thesis is that elected politicians “pander” to public opinion by tailoring their policy positions to poll results and other indicators of public opinion. As *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd, in reference to the Clinton administration’s heavy reliance on polls, famously lamented, “Polling has turned leaders into followers” (1997). Jacobs and Shapiro point to an intriguing paradox: although the use of public opinion polling has increased since the 1970s (contributing to the “pandering” charge), at the same time there has been a “widening gulf between politicians’ policy decisions and the preferences of the American people” (2000, xii). Jacobs and Shapiro’s solution to this paradox is to identify a set of electoral motivations and tactics by which public officials—both presidents and legislators—increasingly make use of public opinion polls to create the *appearance of responsiveness* to public opinion that at the same time allows public officials to pursue their own policy ends. One of the key motivations for trying to change public opinion, rather than be responsive to it, is that this strategy allows politicians to satisfy both their electoral and policy objectives. Public officials can both sustain public support and enact policy initiatives that they prefer and/or that are preferred by activists, special interest groups, and campaign donors.

Politicians pursue this two-pronged goal by a strategy of *crafted talk* that is aimed to change public opinion in order to minimize the risk of appearing unresponsive to the wishes of the voters. As a consequence, politicians make use of public opinion polls “to determine how to craft their public presentations and win public support for the policies they and their supporters prefer” (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, xiii). Jacobs and Shapiro identify three specific techniques in this strategy. First, politicians make use of polls and focus groups to determine the arguments and symbols about specific policies that the public finds most appealing. Second, they influence press coverage by “staying on message,” by making their simple, crafted message the dominant—and, ideally, the only—story the media are able to cover. Third, politicians make use of a “priming” strategy that is aimed not at changing the public’s fundamental values and preferences but rather at maximizing the weight and priority the public assigns to considerations that already exist in the policy realm. For example, in the health care debate between the Clinton administration and the Republican-led House of Representatives in the mid-1990s (the case that is the centerpiece of Jacobs and Shapiro’s

analysis), Republican opponents to health care reform claimed that the Clinton plan would increase "big government," while the Clinton administration's message emphasized "security for all." The point, of course, is that the public already has views about big government and security, and the battle between the two sides was over which criteria would be used to evaluate the policy proposals.

Jacobs and Shapiro make use of what they call an insider research strategy that emphasizes an in-depth analysis of elites' strategic calculations and decisions, relying on interviews with key players, official memoranda and records, and content analysis of statements and official communications. This insider strategy is contrasted with an "outsider" approach that focuses on aggregate relationships and is unable to delve into the "black box" of policy decision making. Ultimately, the integration of the two approaches will provide the most compelling support for this, and for any other, model of the relationship between public opinion, policy, and elite communication strategies. Nonetheless, the Jacobs and Shapiro case studies marshal an impressive body of evidence that refutes the simple pandering claim and that supports the more complex and nuanced model of simulated responsiveness. Indeed, the resulting model does not fit easily into the tripartite framework introduced at the outset of this chapter. Rather than a simple unidirectional causal flow between public opinion and policymaking, the Jacobs and Shapiro model suggests that the causal arrow moves in both directions: public opinion provides the basis for elite strategies, which are then used to move public opinion to be congruent with public officials' own policy preferences.

The Effectiveness of Explanatory Rhetoric in Shaping Public Opinion

What is the content of the verbal communications that public officials use to influence public opinion, under what conditions are these communications made, and which are more or less effective? In turning to these questions now, I limit the discussion to a particular type of verbal communication—accounts, or explanations (used interchangeably)—for two reasons. The first is that explanation is a fundamental manifestation of accountability in a representative democracy, and so a particularly significant form of political rhetoric. According to Hanna Pitkin, representation implies "acting in the interest of the represented, in a manner responsive to them. . . . the representative must act in such a way that there is no conflict, or if it occurs an explanation is called for" (1967, 209–210). Richard Fenno also emphasized the centrality of explanation to theories of representation when he proclaimed: "Theories of representation will always be incomplete without theories that explain explaining" (1978, 162). The second reason for the focus on political explanations is that no systematic work exists in other rhetorical domains that consider all of

the important elements—content, antecedents, and effectiveness. I hope that this overview will prompt more systematic investigation of the content, antecedents, and consequences of other types of political communications.

John Kingdon (1973) was the first congressional scholar to draw attention to the importance of “explaining the vote.” Soon after, Fenno’s classic analysis of congressional “home style” (1978) outlined three basic strategies used to cultivate constituent support and public opinion, namely resource allocation, self-presentation, and explanation of Washington activity. A sizable experimental literature concerned with the consequences and effectiveness of political explanations exists (I turn to this later), but there is less systematic research on the motivations and constraints that shape the expression of political explanations (see Austen-Smith 1992; Bianco 1994; Willey 1998, for exceptions).

A central theme in the literature is reflected by the adage, “If you have to explain, you’re in trouble” (Fenno 1978). In other words, explanation occurs when the public official’s actions have negative implications, be it personal misconduct or an unpopular policy vote or decision (Pitkin’s discussion also assumes that explanation follows “conflict” or unpopular actions).³ And, in fact, the anecdotal evidence is very clear that when politicians violate their constituents’ expectations, through policy decisions or personal misconduct, they respond with explanations or *blame-management strategies* (McGraw 1991, 2001) to contain the political fallout and shore up public opinion. A good example of a recent political explanation in response to public outrage was former president Clinton’s op-ed column in the *New York Times* (February 18, 2001), titled “My Reasons for the Pardons,” and beginning with the statement: “Because of the intense scrutiny and criticisms of the pardons of Marc Rich . . . I want to explain what I did and why.”

Although explanations of unpopular decisions and misconduct are widespread, explanations can be provided in other circumstances, such as in the context of positive actions. William Bianco has argued that “explanations appear to have political value” (1994, 53), for example, by strengthening perceptions of accessibility and as a mechanism for position taking. This argument is key, as it suggests a link between political explanations and the electorally useful activities identified by David Mayhew (1974). Although Mayhew did not discuss explanations directly, it is not much of a theoretical stretch to argue that explanations of positive outcomes can serve as *advertising* (for example, a public official may issue a press release explaining a popular vote in the hopes of garnering media attention and strengthening public support); as *credit claiming* (for example, explaining a vote that will yield particularized or generalized benefits for constituents); and as a component of *position taking*, defined by Mayhew as “the public enunciation of a judgmental statement on anything likely to be of interest to political actors” (1974, 61). In fact, it is difficult to imagine a public statement of a position—“I will support the president,” “I am opposed to this bill”—without an accompanying explanation of the reason behind the position.

Little systematic work has delved into the antecedents of the decision to explain, particularly work considering whether explanations are more likely to be prompted by electoral troubles or offered as an act of self-promotion. A recent analysis of explanations for a high-profile, controversial vote—the House of Representatives' votes on the articles of impeachment against President Bill Clinton in December of 1998—yielded results that have intriguing implications for this question (McGraw, Anderson, and Willey 2000). My co-authors and I examined explanations posted to House members' personal web pages, an increasingly common medium used by legislators to communicate with their constituents. Forty percent of the House members posted an explanation of their impeachment votes. Results of that analysis were complex, but generally consistent with the argument that explanations were used to elaborate and capitalize on an action that was positively received by constituents. That is, House members were more likely to post an explanation of their impeachment votes when their votes were consistent with their districts' preferences (level of support for Clinton), not when they voted in a way that violated district preferences.⁴ In other words, House members voluntarily offered an explanation when they were communicating good news to supportive districts; they avoided communicating unpopular news to districts that would be more critical of their decision. The conclusion to be drawn from this study is not that political explanation is limited to self-promotion; it is clear that politicians are frequently forced—by the media, their colleagues, and a disgruntled public—to explain their behavioral violations. Rather, results of the impeachment explanation study suggest that scholars broaden the theoretical framework within which explanation and representation are understood, recognizing that a host of motivations, not simply blame management, can contribute to the decision to explain.

Understanding the consequences of political explanations for shaping public opinion requires a theoretical framework that is both capable of linking specific opinion consequences to particular types of explanations and capable of specifying the underlying psychological mechanisms. A number of typologies have been proposed (among them Goffman 1971; Schlenker 1980; Schonbach 1990; Scott and Lyman 1968; Sykes and Matza 1957; Tedeschi and Reiss 1980; Tetloc 1985), but there is widespread agreement that four types of accounts are fundamental. I have argued that the four types can be conceptualized within a 2×2 framework, as summarized in Figure 12-1 (McGraw 2001).⁵ If a public official finds himself or herself in a political predicament, the disapproving audience is implicitly making two accusations: (1) a negative or objectionable event has occurred, and (2) you—the official being criticized—are responsible for the event. The first dimension is concerned with perceptions of the negativity of the event, whereas the second dimension concerns attributed responsibility for the event.

Within this framework, *concessions* involve an acknowledgment that the negative event occurred and an implicit or explicit acceptance of responsibility. For example, Attorney

Figure 12-1 A Framework for Political Explanations

	Accept event is negative	Deny event is negative
Accept responsibility	Concessions	Justifications
Deny responsibility	Excuses	Denials

General Janet Reno, after the Branch Davidians' deaths in Waco, Texas, in 1993, stated: "I made the decision. I'm accountable. The buck stops with me." Concessions often, but not always, include expressions of regret, apologies, and even offers of restitution. *Excuses*, like concessions, acknowledge that an offense has occurred, but reject full responsibility for the event. Common political excuses include a denial of intent or foreseeability, diffusion of responsibility to other actors, and claims of mitigating circumstances. (Consider, as an example, Oregon Senator Bob Packwood's response to allegations of sexual misconduct in 1992: "Whether alcohol was a factor in these incidents, I do not know. In any event, alcohol at best can only be a partial explanation.")

Whereas concessions and excuses at least implicitly acknowledge that a problem exists, *justifications* are characterized by attempts to deny or minimize the negative implications of the event. Justifications can emphasize positive objective consequences; or the opinions of prominent others who support the action (in the *New York Times* op-ed column referred to earlier, Clinton noted that "the case for the pardons was reviewed and advocated . . . by three distinguished Republican attorneys"); or moral principles through which the event may be reinterpreted. An example of a moral justification was Democratic Senator Harry Reid's explanation of his unpopular vote against Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court in 1991 to his Nevada constituents: "The polls in the state clearly favored him. From a political standpoint, I badly wanted to vote for Clarence Thomas. However, my conscience wouldn't let me do it. I thought she [Anita Hill] was telling the truth." Finally, *denials* are not technically an explanation at all, but a refutation on the part of the official that the event even occurred. President Clinton's televised refutation, finger wagging—"I did not have sex with that woman"—at the beginning of the Lewinsky scandal is perhaps the most prominent denial in recent political history.

Ultimately we are interested in the public opinion consequences of political explanations, assuming that they are not simply empty rhetoric. The method of choice for systematically investigating the consequences of political explanations has been experimentation,

for three reasons. First, it is enormously difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the independent influences of the explanation itself, the to-be-explained event, and the history and characteristics of the explainer with a naturalistic research strategy. Most political predicaments in the real world involve one or at most a handful of public officials, rendering systematic quantitative analysis of the independent impact of the event and accompanying rhetoric impossible. Experimentation is ideal for decomposing complex phenomena into independent conceptual parameters and isolating their independent impact on some outcome variable. Moreover, a serious problem with the analysis of real political predicaments is the lack of variance on the key independent variable, that is, the explanation. The underlying question involved in understanding the impact of a political explanation (or any political rhetoric, for that matter) involves the implicit “compared to what?” question. What if Clinton had continued to stonewall via “no comment” responses, or conceded immediately, or blamed Ms. Lewinsky, or invoked childhood traumas, instead of making the “I did not have sex” denial? Experimentation facilitates theoretically meaningful comparisons to shed light on the “compared to what?” question. Finally, experimentation is ideally suited for probing the underlying reasons by which outcomes occur (Kinder and Palfrey 1992; McGraw 1996).

In elaborating on causal mechanisms, it has been useful to consider political explanations as a kind of persuasive communication—verbal appeals aimed at changing or influencing public opinion about some political event. Accordingly, citizens’ reactions to accounts can be understood in terms of the steps that are necessary for successful persuasion (McGuire 1985; Zaller 1992): (1) citizens must be *exposed* to the explanation; (2) they must *pay attention* to it; (3) they must *comprehend* it; and (4) they must *accept* the explanation as legitimate and credible. This fourth step is critical, because a citizen must be satisfied with an explanation before it can have its desired—from the perspective of the politician—ameliorative impact. Given the centrality of acceptance in effective persuasion, it is not surprising that our research has consistently indicated that satisfaction with a proffered account is the key factor in predicting subsequent evaluations of the public official.

Table 12-1 summarizes the varying degrees of satisfaction elicited by different explanations from two studies in this research program. In the top panel, research participants read about a controversial political decision (a reprimand of a member of Congress for behavior modeled after Barney Frank’s homosexual relationship with a male prostitute in 1990), and asked to imagine that their representative had provided one of two explanations for his vote (McGraw, Timpone, and Bruck 1993). The explanations were drawn from Fenno’s (1978) interviews with real members of Congress. The alternatives were designed to examine whether principled justifications rooted in different roles were more or less effective with the public. In a delegate role (explanation 2 in Table 12-1), the representative votes according to public wishes in the district. In the trustee role (explanation 1), a member of

Table 12-1 Satisfaction with Explanation Type from Member of Congress: Evidence from Two Experiments

Appeals to Conscience^a

Trustee/individualistic justification. "But to base this decision on politics and public opinion would violate my own conscience, as to what I feel is the proper course of action. I know this vote may damage my political career. But that pales into insignificance when weighted against my duty to vote as my conscience dictates. Therefore, I voted my conscience, against the acknowledged wishes of many of my constituents." Mean = .66

Delegate/communitarian justification. "But I know the people of my district. I am one of you and the issue is our conscience as a community. I imagined how the people of this district would vote if they were in my shoes. We are a compassionate, forgiving people. I have voted as I believe this community would vote, in a compassionate and forgiving manner." Mean = .64

Excuses and Justifications^b

Mitigating circumstances excuse. "These kinds of decisions are always difficult. I didn't feel I had a choice on this one because a change was necessary. The failure of this nation's previous education policies requires drastic solutions such as those included in the education bill." Mean = .40

Diffusion of responsibility excuse. "These kinds of decisions are always difficult, and very complicated. Unfortunately, my staff failed to provide me with complete information about the likely consequences of the bill and therefore I wasn't made fully aware of all of its possible ramifications." Mean = .22

Party loyalty. "These kinds of decisions are always difficult. I agree with the leaders of my party that the passage of this bill is in the nation's best interest, and I voted accordingly." Mean = .35

Benefits justification. "These kinds of decisions are always difficult. I voted for the education bill because I think that it also brings with it real benefits for this district. For example, as part of the same package of legislation, funds have been set aside for research on improving science education and reducing dropout rates." Mean = .43

Normative justification. "These kinds of decisions are always difficult. I voted for the education bill because I believe that under the new allocation criteria the distribution of education funds is fairer, going to those who need the funding most. I followed my conscience and did what I thought was the best thing to do." Mean = .42

Hypothetical comparison justification. "These kinds of decisions are always difficult. This education bill could have been a lot worse. For example, other versions of the bill were considered that would have resulted in much more serious cuts in funding for this district." Mean = .33

Note: The values after each explanation are the mean level of satisfaction elicited by each explanation, coded on a 0 to 1 scale, where higher values reflect more satisfaction.

^aThe to-be-explained controversy in this experiment was a vote for a congressional reprimand; see McGraw, Timpone, and Bruck (1993) for details. The average levels of satisfaction elicited by the two explanations do not differ ($F < 1$).

^bThe to-be-explained controversy in this experiment was a vote for a reduction in federal funding for education; see McGraw, Best, and Timpone (1995) for details. The differences among the mean levels of satisfaction elicited by the explanations are significant ($F[3,305] = 9.26, p < .001, \eta^2 = .135$).

Congress votes according to what he or she sees as best for the nation. In fact, as Table 12-1 indicates, both justifications were highly, and equally, acceptable.

However, many of the explanations that we have used in our research are not nearly as effective as those principled justifications. The second part of Table 12-1 summarizes the effectiveness of a wider range of explanations. In this study (McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995), research participants read about a complex and controversial bill involving the distribution of grant-in-aid funding for education which would result in cuts in such funding for their district, and they were asked to imagine that their elected representative provided one of six explanations (systematically manipulated) for his vote. Justifications claiming real benefits (explanation 4) or rooted in normative claims (explanation 5) were significantly more satisfactory than other types of explanations, in particular an excuse attempting to diffuse responsibility to the member's staff (explanation 2). In fact, excuses laying full or partial responsibility on other parties are consistently among the least effective explanations we find.

More generally, our experimental work examining the effectiveness of various types of political justifications and excuses suggests a number of broad conclusions about what makes for a satisfactory explanation.⁶ One principle points to the general characteristic of commonness: explanations that are more common in political rhetoric tend to be more satisfactory (Bennett 1980; McGraw 1991). This finding is in line with the more general argument that the public responds more favorably to political rhetoric that is simple and familiar, when political arguments and themes fit categories the public already accepts (Edelman 1988; Margolis and Mauser 1989). A second principle points to individual characteristics of the citizen: trusting and less sophisticated individuals tend to be more satisfied with political explanations, all else being equal (McGraw and Hubbard 1996). Third, existing attitudes about the public official (Gonzales et al. 1995) or the to-be-explained decision (McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995) serve as an anchor for acceptance of subsequent rhetoric: simply, citizens are more satisfied with explanations provided by public officials whom they like or for decisions or behaviors that they feel positively toward. Fourth, at least in the political realm, justifications appealing to normative principles—particularly personal ethical standards like fairness or moral conscience, as well as collective social benefits—consistently are the most positively evaluated explanations (Chanley et al. 1994; McGraw 1991; McGraw, Best, and Timpone 1995; McGraw, Timpone, and Bruck 1993). In contrast, excuses involving a diffusion of responsibility are consistently unacceptable.⁷ These determinants of satisfaction with political explanations are critical, as satisfaction is a key determinant of subsequent evaluations of the public official: satisfactory accounts boost public support whereas accounts that are rejected can do further damage to the official's reputation.

In addition to the link between acceptance/rejection of political explanations and sub-

sequent evaluations of the public official, three other consequences are noteworthy. In line with the conceptual framework summarized in Figure 12-1, excuses and justifications influence different types of judgments about the predicament. Because excuses attempt to deny full responsibility for a decision and its consequences, effective (satisfactory) excuses shift assignment of blame away from the public official (McGraw 2001). An important caveat here: many excuses are inherently unsatisfactory and only those that are acceptable can ameliorate blame. In contrast, because justifications are an attempt to redefine perceptions of the act and its consequences, successful justifications are most effective in persuading citizens to change their opinion about a controversial act or policy (McGraw, Best, and Timponi 1995). Third, political explanations have consequences for inferences about specific dimensions of political character (Kinder 1986; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986). For example, a *trustee* justification, such as "In the end, I used my own judgment as to what is in your best interests," increases perceptions of leadership (the traits "commands respect," "[not] easily influenced," "[not] weak"), whereas a *delegate* justification, such as "I owe it to my constituents to vote according to their wishes, and that is what I did," increases perceptions of empathy (comprised of the traits "compassionate," "[not] out of touch," and "really cares"; McGraw 2001).

In summary, political explanations have systematic and theoretically meaningful public opinion consequences. They can influence attributions of responsibility, inferences about political character, and opinions about controversial policies. Most important, political explanations have an impact on citizens' evaluations of the public official who is the source of the communication; in other words, the political messages citizens receive greatly affect their opinions of public officials. Of course, a number of important questions remain to be addressed, questions that will require methodologies other than experimentation. For example, how do politicians translate their electoral goals—namely, to be supported and eventually reelected—into specific communication strategies? How do they accommodate potentially conflicting goals (such as to be truthful and to be reelected)?

It is also evident that many political explanations fail spectacularly. For example, less than one-quarter of the American public reported being satisfied with the explanations provided by their members of Congress to account for their overdraft checks in the House bank scandal of 1991 (Hugie 1992). Why do seemingly rational actors provide such poor explanations? An important principle may be the timing of the accountability pressures, or *when* public officials anticipate the need to explain. Erving Goffman (1959) identified two strategies involved in impression management (or "facework"). The first, *preventive practices*, are the steps taken prior to making a decision, in anticipation of a valued audience's response. The role of such preventive practices is well established in the congressional literature, where it has frequently been noted that legislators' decisions are influenced by their need to eventually justify the decision to their constituents (Arnold 1990; Austen-Smith 1992;

Fenno 1978; Kingdon 1973; Mayhew 1974; Weaver 1986, 1988). In contrast, *corrective practices* are steps taken after a decision that an audience finds to be inappropriate or objectionable. It is here that the official must use "damage control tactics" or blame-management strategies (McGraw 1991, 2001) to restore public support. It may well be that preventive practices are more effective than corrective practices, because the official who takes accountability seriously and considers that before making a decision is more likely to make a vigilant analysis of options and thus employ more reasonable rhetorical strategies (Tetlock 1992).

Deceiving the Public

The three research programs just reviewed—presidential strategies of going public, the use of crafted talk, and the use of political explanations to manage the fallout from political predicaments—provide solid support for the proposition that elite rhetoric can effectively shape public opinion. The potency of elite rhetoric poses few normative problems if we can safely assume that the arguments that are espoused by public officials are accurate and sincere articulations of the true reasons for the behavior or position being advocated. If public officials provide correct and useful information that will help citizens reach more fully informed opinions, then officials are providing a service by educating the public (Page and Shapiro 1992). But if we have reason to believe that politicians sometimes deceive the public by providing false or misleading information and arguments, then the normative implications are enormously disconcerting. Most scholars would probably take as a given that politicians on occasion deceive the public, although they may disagree about the frequency (Bok 1989; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jamieson 1992; Page 1996; Page and Shapiro 1989, 1992). It is difficult, as an epistemological matter, to identify instances of truth and deception in political rhetoric, and social scientists who attempt to do so wander into "minefields of subjectivity and controversy" (Page and Shapiro 1989, 308). Shapiro and his colleagues have notably braved these minefields and have specified a number of instances in contemporary American politics where the public appears to have been misled or manipulated by public officials (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Page and Shapiro 1989, 1992).⁸

The disquieting normative implications of elite deception are magnified by the proposition that the public finds it enormously difficult to detect deceptive political rhetoric. There are both psychological and political mechanisms that play a role in this dilemma (McGraw 1998). The psychological literature on deception suggests that people are simply not very good at detecting deception under most circumstances (Friedman and Tucker 1990). Non-verbal indicators provide moderately reliable cues to deception, but the mediated nature of most political rhetoric renders these cues less useful, particularly if the visual medium is stripped away, as is the case in newspapers or radio news. Finally, detecting deception

presupposes a willingness on the part of the audience to consider the possibility that a statement is not truthful. In part, this willingness to be suspicious about the veracity of political communication is rooted in citizens' evaluation of the politician and the content of the communication (McGraw, Lodge, and Jones 2000). Despite the well-documented declines in levels of trust in government (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1995), opinions about specific public officials still tend to be positive in the aggregate (Sears 1983). Simply stated, if a citizen holds a positive opinion about the politician, he or she will be predisposed to accept the sincerity of the politician's arguments.

If citizens are disinclined to be suspicious of political rhetoric if left to their own psychological devices, suspicion and scrutiny may be prompted by political forces, in particular by other elites and public officials charging deception. But in fact, there are several reasons to believe that this kind of countercharge does not happen very frequently. First, it is widely recognized by scholars, public officials, and the public that political rhetoric is "heavily ritualized" (Graber 1976, 12), and that exaggerated and even false claims are part of the political spectacle (Edelman 1977; Bennett 1980). Respect for the ritual is a key reason that politicians rarely challenge each other, because they participate in the same ritual themselves. Second, to declare someone to be a liar is often a no-win situation for the accuser. W. Peter Robinson argues, "To call someone a liar is potentially dramatic, and even if true, can rebound on the challenger. Conventionally, it appears that it is the challenger and not the alleged liar who has broken the stronger rule" (1993, 364). Kathleen Hall Jamieson's (2001) recent analysis of "civility in the House of Representatives" provides support for this claim that allegations of "liar" are risky. Explicit use of the word *liar* is quite rare on the floor of the House, making its most frequent appearance in 1988 with only 2.4 utterances per every 1,000 pages of the *Congressional Record*. The 106th Congress in 2000 was at the low end of the scale with about 0.6 utterances of the word *liar* for every 1,000 pages of the *Record*. Moreover, on the rare occasion the word *liar* is used in the House, it is most frequently directed toward foreign nationals (41 percent of the uses), not American public officials.⁹

Although it is an important step to recognize that deceptive and misleading political communication is used to manipulate public opinion, prescribing feasible solutions for the problem is a far thornier issue (see Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, for specific recommendations). The goal for social scientists and citizens alike should be to recognize that elite rhetoric can be rooted in both laudatory and unscrupulous motives, and to be willing to try to tell the difference. For social scientists, achieving this goal requires a more systematic understanding of the parameters that elicit and sustain elite deception as well as the conditions and opportunities citizens have to limit such manipulation. For citizens, the requirement is constant vigilance against instances of "elite domination" (Zaller 1992) of public opinion and a steady insistence "that politicians follow the popular will and allow citizens to engage in unfettered public debate" (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 339).

Conclusion

The evidence reviewed here, obtained from a variety of research methodologies and informed by an assortment of theoretical frameworks, provides solid support for the proposition that elite rhetoric can be used to shape and move public opinion. This is probably not a surprising conclusion to many readers. But the undeniable emphasis in the past twenty years of research has focused on democratic responsiveness, where the causal arrow flows from public opinion to public policy. The role of elite strategies and communications has been downplayed, if considered at all. The research programs reviewed in this chapter flip the democratic responsiveness relationship on its head in various ways. We are still a long way from understanding the frequency with which these various models are utilized (the Bennett conjecture noted at the outset), and the conditions that lead them to be utilized successfully. As Page has argued, multiple research methods will be appropriate and necessary to disentangle the complex interrelationships among policy, public opinion, and rhetoric, to understand the conditions under which these effects are larger or smaller (1994, 28). Nevertheless, if we want to understand how democracy works in the United States, and elsewhere, it is important to understand how often, and under what circumstances, public officials follow, lead, or manipulate public opinion.

Notes

1. I ignore research on the mass media as the conduit by which public opinion is shaped and research on the effects of campaigns as mechanisms of persuasion aimed at shifting public opinion about political candidates.

2. As Kernell notes, the model "is silent on what an unpopular president should do to restore the public's confidence" (1997, 129).

3. The emphasis in political science has its roots in Goffman's seminal work on self-presentation and the use of accounts as "remedial tactics" to minimize the negative repercussions of undesirable behavior (1959, 1971).

4. In addition to the district preferences, more junior members were more likely to explain (consistent with Fenno's and Kingdon's arguments linking seniority to attentiveness), as were House members in leadership positions.

5. Note that this analytic framework has been limited to explanations of predicaments, or negative outcomes. In addition, the four account types are regarded as superordinate categories, each of which includes a number of subcategories (note that Schonbach's 1990 typology contains more than 100 types of accounts).

6. We have focused on excuses and justifications as explanations for explaining policy decisions because they are the most commonly occurring accounts (in politics and other domains; Austin 1961; Bennett 1980) and because concessions and denials for policy decisions are quite uncommon.

7. These conclusions are limited to comparisons of the effectiveness of a variety of excuses and justifications for policy decisions. As Cody and McLaughlin (1990) make clear in a comprehensive review, the evidence as to which of the four types of accounts are more or less effective outside the political realm is decidedly mixed, with different patterns of results obtained in different contexts (for

example, interpersonal, legal, and organizational). Moreover, all four types of explanations have effective and ineffective variants.

8. Page and Shapiro distinguish between *misleading* the public, which they define as “providing false, incorrect, biased or selective information” and *manipulating* the public, which occurs when public officials mislead “consciously and deliberately, by means of lies, falsehoods, deception, and concealment” (1989, 308). This is a narrower conception of manipulation than the one used in this chapter.

9. Consideration of close synonyms for the word *liar* in its various forms (such as *hoax*, *farce*, and *prevaricate*) increases the occurrence rate to about 150 utterances for every 1,000 pages of the *Congressional Record* (Jamieson 2001).