

Information in Political Life

Concepts of Information i218

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Agenda

Information in democratic societies

The 19th-century background

The Lippmann-Dewey debate

The rational voter

Political symbols now

Political information in the digital future?



Faith in information

We must use all available technologies and methods to open up the federal government, creating a new level of transparency to change the way business is conducted in Washington and giving Americans the chance to participate in government deliberations and decision-making in ways that were not possible only a few years ago.

www.barackobama.org



Faith in information

How is the information revolution affecting the practice and prospects of democracy around the world? Is it growing the global public's opportunities for free political expression and participation from the grassroots up, or rather is it simply reinforcing existing patterns of inequality and hierarchical power relationships? Is it strengthening the social foundations of electoral politics, such as political parties and a shared civic culture, or is it weakening them? Will it expand the ability of authoritarian regimes to utilize propaganda and to monitor their citizens' behavior, or will it help pro-democracy activists to progressively chip away at their grip on power?

Wm. F. Drake, "Democracy and the Information Revolution," Carnegie Foundation report



Information in Democratic Societies



Information in Democratic Societies



The democratic ideal: the organic public

Public opinion shaped by informed participation, civil dialogue/interaction, deliberation, critical consensus



"Just as nature has set bounds to the stature of a well-formed man, outside which he is either a giant or a dwarf, so, in what concerns the best constitution of a state, there are limits to the size it can have if it is to be neither too large to be well-governed nor too small to maintain itself. ... The more the social bond extends the looser it becomes, and in general a small state is proportionately stronger than a large one."

J. J. Rousseau, *Social Contract*, II, 6



The loss (and recovery?) of democratic innocence

Is true participatory democracy viable in advanced societies?

- Size and complexity of government

- Size of public

- Understanding of public

- Interest of public (why does anybody vote?)

Mechanisms for mediating between public and government:

- Representation and media...



The loss (and recovery?) of democratic innocence

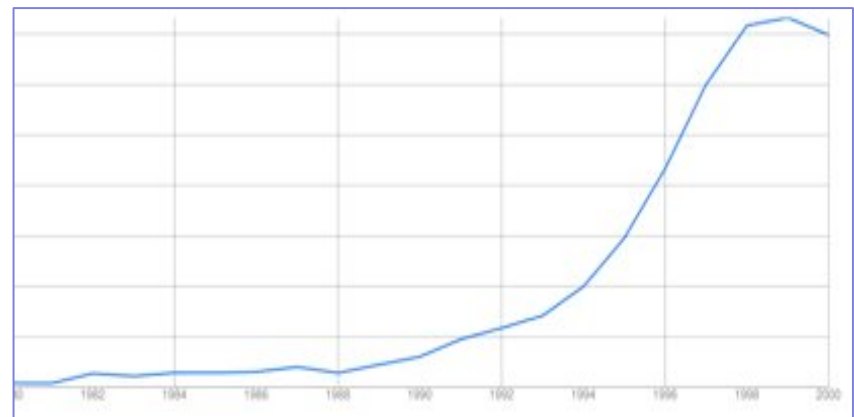
"If we ever did get to the point where we could really conduct a national conversation about race, we probably wouldn't need to." -- Some guy on the radio

Persistent nostalgia for lost community: the longing for "national conversation"

"the nation is literally in one great room... The people, having heard the debate on both sides of every issue, can express their will." George Gallup, 1936



Jimmy Carter, Town Hall Meeting, 1976



"national conversation" 1980-2000



**The ~~debate~~ contrast? between
Lippmann and Dewey:
Is informed public deliberation possible?**



The turn-of-the-century background

Growth and complexity of government

Growth of the public

Rise of the mass press

Progressivism and the reform movement

The invention of "literacy"

Propaganda and the press agent



The turn-of-the-century background



informed **electorate**, **voters**, **citizen** 1850-2000



Is informed public deliberation possible?

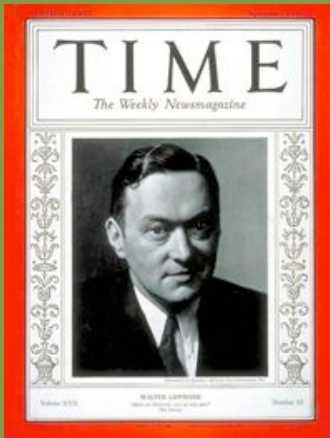
The press as medium? (OED: "A person or thing which acts as an intermediary")

The local face-to-face community has been invaded by forces so fast, so remote in initiation, so far-reaching in scope and so complexly indirect in operation, that they are, from the standpoint of the members of local social units, unknown.

We have the physical tools of communication as never before. The thoughts and aspirations congruous with them are not communicated, and hence are not common. Without such communication the public will remain shadowy and formless... Communication alone can create a great community. Dewey, *The Public and its Problems*



The limits of information: Lippmann



Structural barriers:

...artificial censorships, the limitations of social contact, the comparatively meagre time available in each day for paying attention to public affairs, the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages, the difficulty of making a small vocabulary express a complicated world, and finally a fear of facing those facts which would seem to threaten the established routine of men's lives.



The limits of information: Lippmann



Psychological barriers: the “pseudo-environment”

"[humans] are not equipped to deal with so much subtlety, so much variety, so many permutations and combinations. And although we have to act in that environment, we have to reconstruct it on a simpler model before we can manage with it.

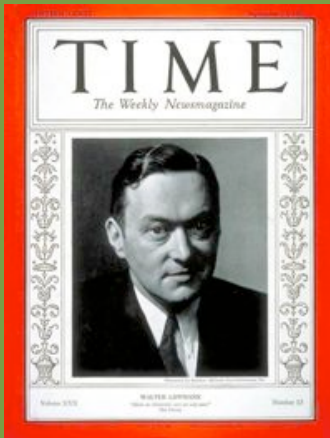
Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

The need in the Great Society not only for publicity but for uninterrupted publicity is indisputable. But we shall misunderstand the need seriously if we imagine that the purpose of the publication can possibly be the informing of every voter. We live at the mere beginnings of public accounting. Yet the facts far exceed our curiosity. ... A few executives here and there . . . read them. The rest of us ignore them for the good and sufficient reason that we have other things to do.

Lippmann, *The Phantom Public*



How is Opinion Formed?

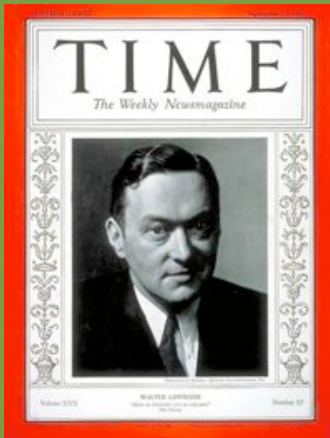


The “pictures in our heads”

[On Aristotle on slavery] This is the perfect stereotype. Its hallmark is that it precedes the use of reason; is a form of perception, imposes a certain character on the data of our senses before the data reach the intelligence. The stereotype is like the lavender window-panes on Beacon Street, like the door-keeper at a costume ball who judges whether the guest has an appropriate masquerade. There is nothing so obdurate to education or to criticism as the stereotype. *Pub Opinion*



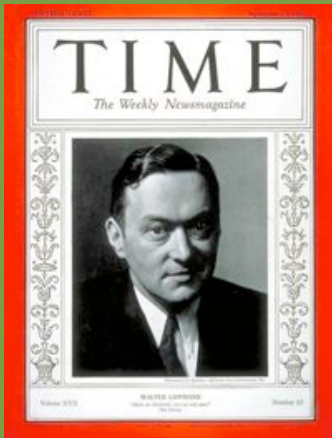
How is Public Opinion Formed?



How are those things known as the Will of the People, or the National Purpose, or Public Opinion crystallized out of such fleeting and casual imagery? But how is it that a vague idea so often has the power to unite deeply felt opinions? ... The fading pictures are displaced by other pictures, and then by names or symbols. But the emotion goes on, capable now of being aroused by the substituted images and names... But if he forgets that he has substituted and simplified, he soon lapses into verbalism, and begins to talk about names regardless of objects. *Public Opinion*



The role of symbols



The making of one general will out of a multitude of general wishes is not an Hegelian mystery... but an art well known to leaders, politicians, and steering committees. It consists essentially in the use of symbols which assemble emotions after they have been detached from their ideas.

Phantom Public

The question of a proper fare on a municipal subway is symbolized as an issue between the People and the Interests, and then the People is inserted in the symbol American, so that finally in the heat of a campaign, an eight cent fare becomes un-American. The Revolutionary fathers died to prevent it. Lincoln suffered that it might not come to pass, resistance to it was implied in the death of those who sleep in France.



The role of symbols



"When political parties or newspapers declare for Americanism Progressivism, Law and Order, Justice, Humanity, they hope to amalgamate the emotion of conflicting factions which would surely divide, if, instead of these symbols, they were invited to discuss a specific program. For when a coalition around the symbol has been effected, feeling flows toward conformity under the symbol rather than toward critical scrutiny of the measures." PO

[symbols] do not stand for specific ideas, but for a sort of truce or junction between ideas.



The role of the public

How can the public will make itself known?

Essentially plebicitary: public can say “yes” or “no” every election cycle

Cf V. O. Key: "The voice of the people is but an echo. The output of an echo chamber bears an inevitable and invariable relation to the input. As candidates and parties clamor for attention and vie for popular support, the people's verdict can be no more than a selective reflection from among the alternatives and outlooks presented." *The Responsible Electorate*, 1966



The role of the public

Who makes decisions about policies. Etc? Experts, chosen by experts

Theoretically we ought to choose the most expert on each subject. But the choice of the expert, though a good deal easier than the choice of truth, is still too difficult and often impracticable.

One mind, or a few can pursue a train of thought, but a group trying to think in concert can as a group do little more than assent or dissent. Distance alone lends enchantment to the view that masses of human beings ever cooperate in any complex affair without a central machine managed by a very few people. PO



Dewey's Response to Lippmann

Democracy as both means and end.

Democracy is not an alternative to the other principles of associative life. It is the idea of community life itself. The transition from family and dynastic government supported by the loyalties of tradition to popular was the outcome primarily of technological discoveries and inventions working a change in the customs by which men had been bound together.

...if the Great Society is to become a Great Community; a society in which the ever-expanding and intricately ramifying consequences of associated activities shall be known in the full sense of that word, so that an organized, articulate Public comes into being.



The Rational Public



The rational voter

"The perverse and unorthodox argument of this little book is that voters are not fools..."

"... in the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives."

V. O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate*, 1966

"collective policy preferences of the American public are predominantly *rational*, in the sense that they are *real...coherent...* and that when collective policy preferences change, they...do so in...*predictable ways*."

"...opinions [about public policy] develop in a reasonable fashion, responding to changing circumstances and to new information."

Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, *The Rational Public*, 1992.



The rational candidate

"Political parties in a democracy formulate policy strictly as a means of gaining votes. They do not seek to gain office in order to carry out certain preconceived policies and serve any particular interest groups; rather they formulate policies and serve interest groups in order to gain office. Thus their social function - which is to formulate and carry out policies when in power as the government - is accomplished as a by-product of their own private motive - which is to attain the income, power, and prestige of being in office."

Anthony Downs, *An economic theory of democracy*, 1957

Analogously, voters make decisions on the basis of expected utility of outcomes.



The rational voter

As long as we retain the assumption of perfect knowledge, no citizen can possibly influence another's vote. Each knows what would benefit him most, what the government is doing, and what other parties would do if they were in power. Therefore, the citizen's taste structure... leads him unambiguously to a decision about how he should vote. ... But as soon as ignorance appears, the clear path from taste structure to voting decision becomes obscured by lack of knowledge.

Anthony Downs, *An economic theory of democracy*, 1957.

(but Downs notes that voter "interests" can be broad, even altruistic...)

.



The rational voter

If elections are so important, why are voters so uninformed?

"The probability that any one citizen's vote will be decisive is very small ... under most circumstances, it is so negligible, that it renders the return from voting "correctly" infinitesimal...[so that] the incentive to become well informed is practically nonexistent. Therefore, we reach the startling conclusion that it is irrational for most citizens to acquire political information for purposes of voting. Ignorance of politics is not a result of unpatriotic apathy; rather it is a highly rational response to the facts of political life in a large democracy."

Anthony Downs, *An economic theory of democracy*, 1957

Hence, it is rational to rely on information shortcuts, expert opinion, party affiliation, etc.

... but why vote at all?



Popkin: The Reasoning Voter

General principles:

Most information is by-product of everyday life (hence low awareness of political institutions).

People evaluate future prospects in terms of past performance ("retrospective voting")

People substitute evaluation of ideology for eval. of performance.

Ideologies as a shortcut, “verbal image of the good society.”

If voters were fully informed about government and could assess how their own benefits would be affected by a party’s platform... they would pay no attention to ideology... Ideology is not a mark of sophistication, but of uncertainty. Popkin



The Reasoning Voter

Popkin: People use information short-cuts to minimize cost of acquiring information.

Note that ISC's figure in all rational behavior.

ISC's can include:

- elite opinion, media reports, partisan cues (cf 1987 insurance initiatives), family and friends

- Also ethnic/religious identification, personal morality, "single issue" criteria, etc.



The Reasoning Voter

ISC's can include:

elite opinion, media reports, partisan cues (cf 1987 insurance initiatives), family and friends

Also demographic identification, personal morality, "single issue" criteria, etc.

(both favorable & unfavorable)

Prominence of ISC's diminishes effects of "propaganda," etc.

Before public opinion studies of voting, conventional wisdom had it that rational, independent voters gathered and absorbed information, weighed alternatives and made up their minds just before they voted.... Therefore it was assumed that voting was a choice easily manipulated by propaganda.



Ideology as an ISC

If voters.... were fully informed about government and could assess how their own benefits would be affected by a party's platform... they would pay no attention to ideology... Ideology is not a mark of sophistication... but of uncertainty. Popkin
Popkin, "Information Shortcuts..."



The Reasoning Voter

Framing effects:

Poor vs unemployed (Iyengar)

Lives lost vs lives saved (Tversky)

Assisted suicide

undocumented vs. illegal, estate tax vs death tax, personal accounts vs private accounts etc.



The Reasoning Voter

Framing effects:

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Question: Do you favor or oppose ____ serving in the military?

	"Homosexuals"	"Gay Men & Lesbians"
Strongly Favor	34%	51%
Somewhat Favor	25%	19%
Somewhat Oppose	10%	7%
Strongly Oppose	19%	12%



Modern Symbolic Politics

Varieties of “symbols”:

the flag, \$600 ashtrays, personal peccadillos, Terry Schiavo, bad bowling, the “War on Christmas,” the Ten Commandments monument, etc.

“Symbol words”:

values, tradition, freedom (economic, of contract, of choice, etc.) ownership, patriotism, government, choice, color-blind, preference, tradition...

appeasement: “The policy of granting concessions to potential enemies to maintain peace.” Cf similar definitions of *palliation* or *placate*, *propitiate*, etc.

cf Richard Rorty on our “final vocabulary”: “All human beings carry about a set of words which they employ to justify their actions, their beliefs, and their lives. These are the words in which we formulate praise of our friends and contempt for our enemies, our long-term projects, our deepest self-doubts and our highest hopes.



Modern Symbolic Politics, 2



*Lincoln Tax Freedom
Tea Party
4.11.09*



When are ISC's not Rational?

How to distinguish "symbolic" and "substantive" issues?

What are the "rational" ends of political choices – particularly if voting is not a "rational" way of influencing outcomes?

Accounting for selective attention and selective belief

Why would rational voters listen to political talk radio?



Political Discourse Online



Claims about online political discourse

The internet

Broadens access to information

Broadens the opportunity to speak.

Increases the number of information sources, bypassing media "gatekeepers" or official censors.

Offers information about a wider range of topics, and more information and opinion on any given topic.

Provides more reliable ways of checking or interpreting information, and gives citizens more opportunity to verify information



Claims about online political discourse

The internet

Restricts the exchange of information and opinion to a more closed, like-minded group (silo effect)

Exposes people to more information that is misleading, inaccurate, extreme, inflammatory, etc.;

Eliminates the guidance that the traditional media provided.

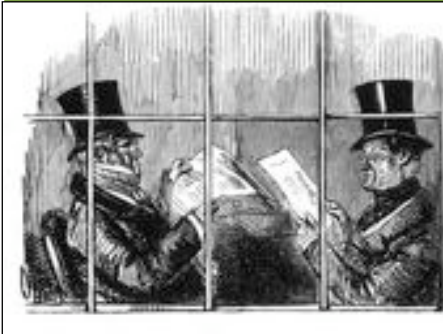
Widens the divisions between the informed and ill-informed sectors of the public.



Polarization of Political Discourse



Polarization and the "Siloing" of Political Discourse



Online discourse facilitates "siloing" of political discourse...
But siloing has independent offline roots





Polarization and the "Siloing" of Political Discourse



Reds talk to reds, blues talk to blues

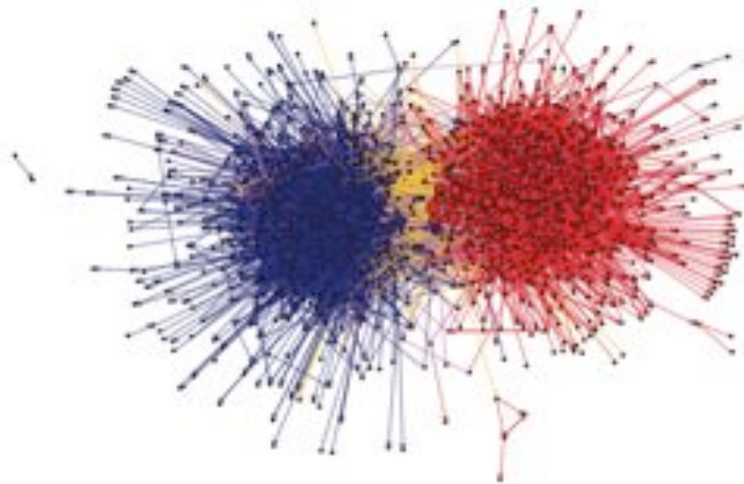


Figure 1: Community structure of political blogs (expanded set), shown using utilizing a GEM layout [31] in the GUESS[3] visualization and analysis tool. The colors reflect political orientation, red for conservative, and blue for liberal. Orange links go from liberal to conservative, and purple ones from conservative to liberal. The size of each blog reflects the number of other blogs that link to it.

Lada Adamic & Nathalie Glance, 2005, "Divided They Blog"

Polarization also evident in topic choice, etc.



Polarization of Political Discourse



Polarization of Political Discourse

Polarization of political language on the Internet mirrors polarization of elite/activist views and the increasing importance of elective associations (geographical, occupational)



Ruptured Discourses

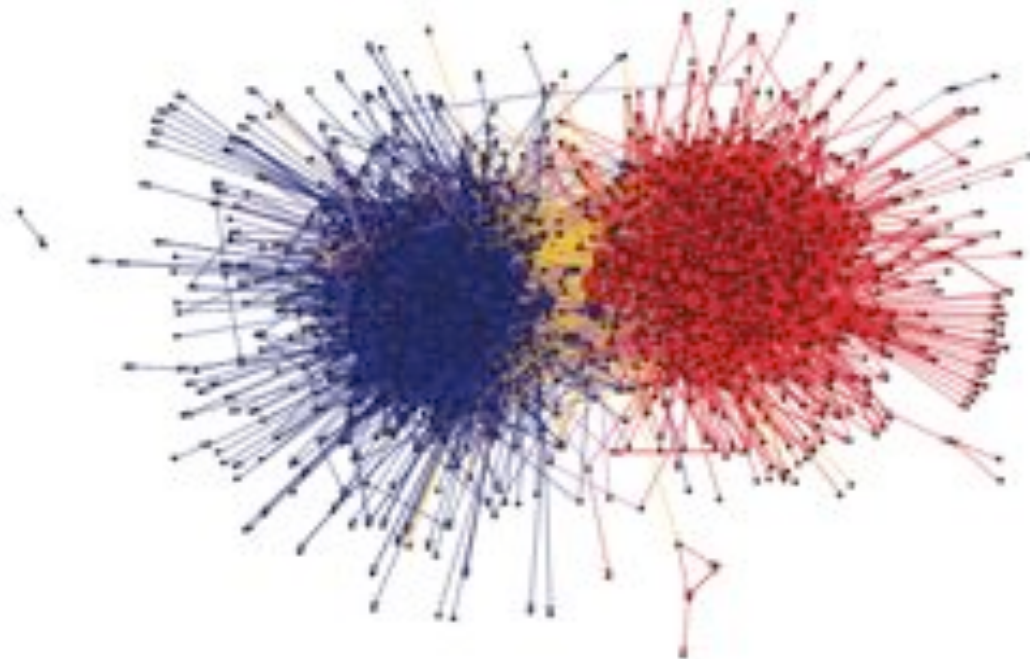
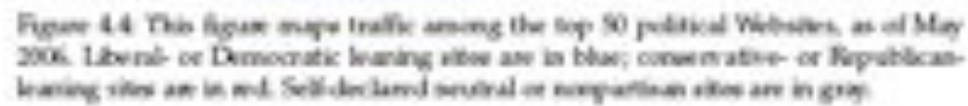


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Lada Adamic & Nathalie Glance, 2005, "Divided They Blog"





Ruptured Discourses

Table 3.2
Links to Allies and Adversaries, 2006

<i>Political orientation</i>	<i>Links to opposition</i>	<i>No links to opposition</i>	<i>Links to like-minded sites</i>	<i>No links to like-minded sites</i>	<i>Total sites</i>
Republican	3	7	7	3	10
Democrats	5	5	5	5	10
Conservative	3	13	16	0	14
Liberal	6	8	13	1	14
All	17	32	41	9	50

From Cass Sunstein, Republic.com 2.0



Polarization by gender?

Rank	Blog	Male readership (%)
1.	<i>DailyKos.com</i>	47%
2.	Instapundit	59 %
3.	<i>Eschaton (Atrios)</i>	52%
4.	Michelle Malkin	57 %
5.	<i>Crooks and liars</i>	32%
6.	Little Green Footballs	89%
7.	Powerline	74%
8.	RedState.org	68%
9.	<i>Wonkette</i>	46%
10.	Andrew Sullivan	53%
11.	<i>Kevin Drum</i>	55%
12.	Hugh Hewitt	80%



Distribution by age

Rank	Blog	18-34	35-44	45-54	55+
1.	Daily Kos.com	34%	13%	29%	24%
2.	Instapundit	29%	22%	30%	29%
3.	Eschaton (Atrios)	26%	29%	37%	14%
4.	Michelle Malkin	19%	29%	19%	33%
5.	Crooks and liars	29%	16%	30%	26%
6.	Little Green Footballs	36%	22%	30%	32%
7.	Powerline	21%	16%	24%	40%
8.	EndState.org	29%	26%	26%	20%
9.	Workester	28%	19%	47%	12%
10.	Andrew Sullivan	31%	34%	12%	13%
11.	Kevin Drum	22%	24%	23%	30%
12.	Hugh Hewitt	31%	23%	29%	21%
Average		27%	23%	29%	25%

Table 4.2: The table presents Hitwise data on the age of visitors to prominent political blogs, as of October 2005. Because of rounding, each row may not add up to exactly 100 percent. The central finding here is that blogger readership is not just limited to the young. On average, half of the readership to these blogs comes from those 45 and older.



Polarized Language

For external consumption:

Policy-related:

undocumented vs. illegal

pro-life vs pro-choice

estate tax vs death tax

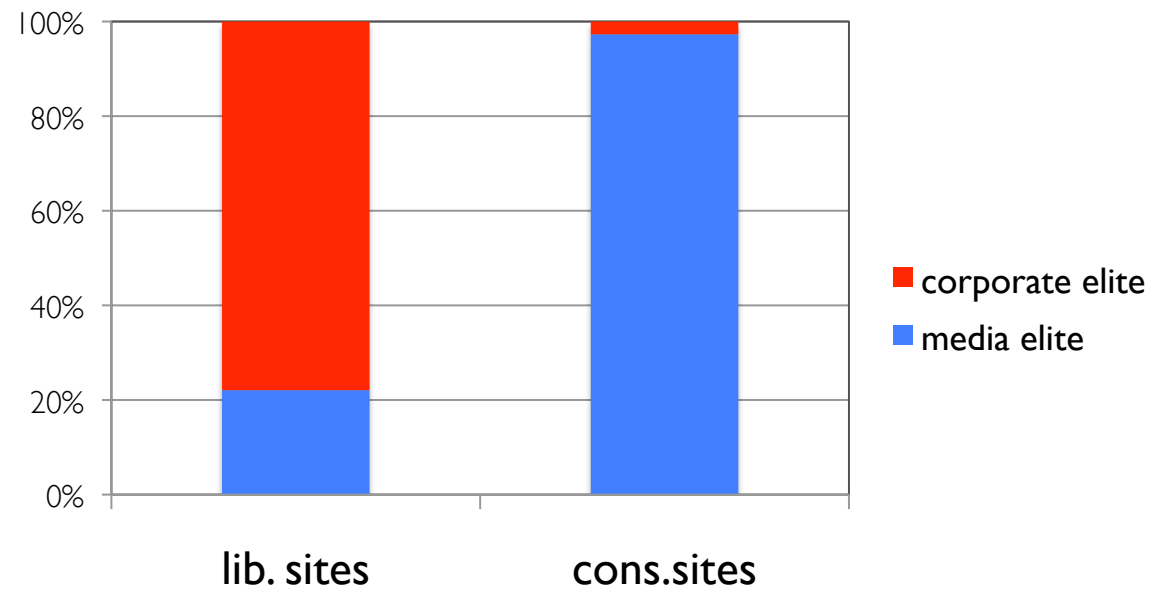
personal accounts vs private accounts etc.

government takeover vs public option



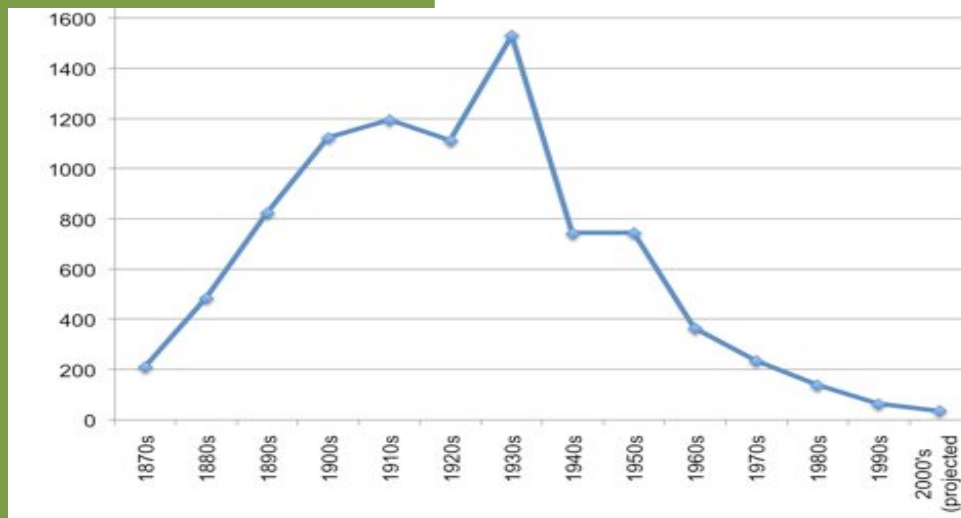
Polarized Language

Ideologically contested concepts: the "final vocabulary" of American politics

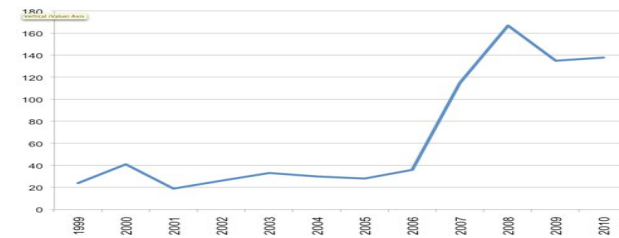




"Hearth Languages" of Right and Left



Frequency of socialistic in New York Times articles: 1870-2000

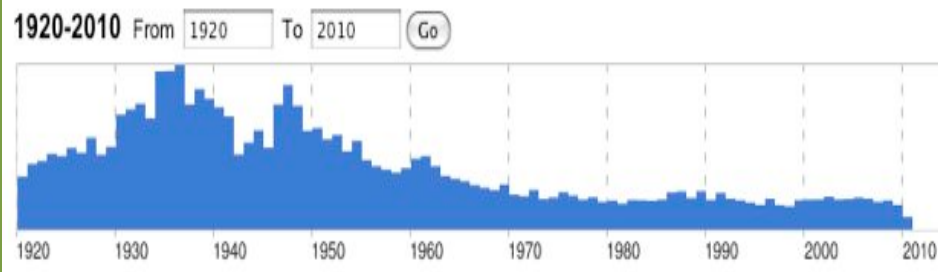


Frequency of socialistic in broadcasts, 1999-2010

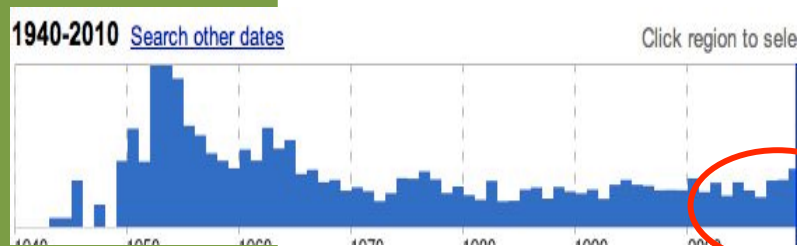
Reconfiguring
"freedom"



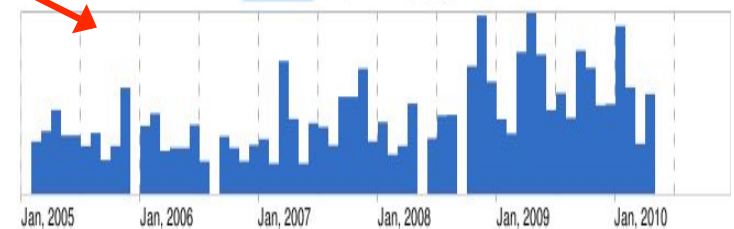
"Hearth Languages" of Right and Left



Communitic in press stories 1920-2010



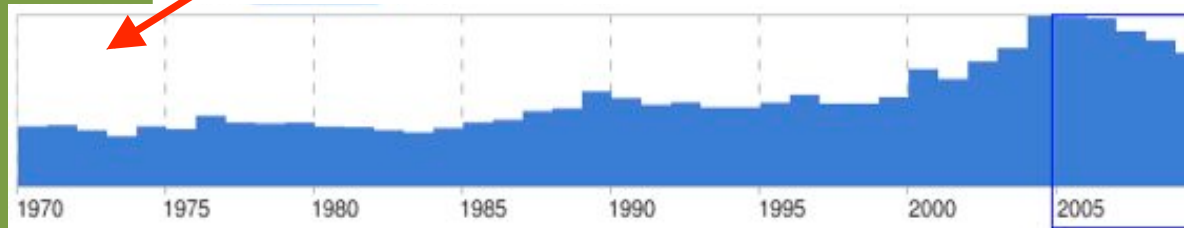
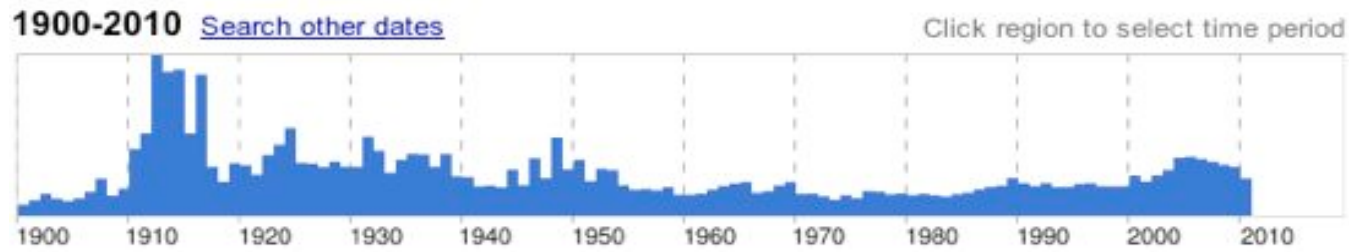
Creeping socialism in press stories, 1940-2010





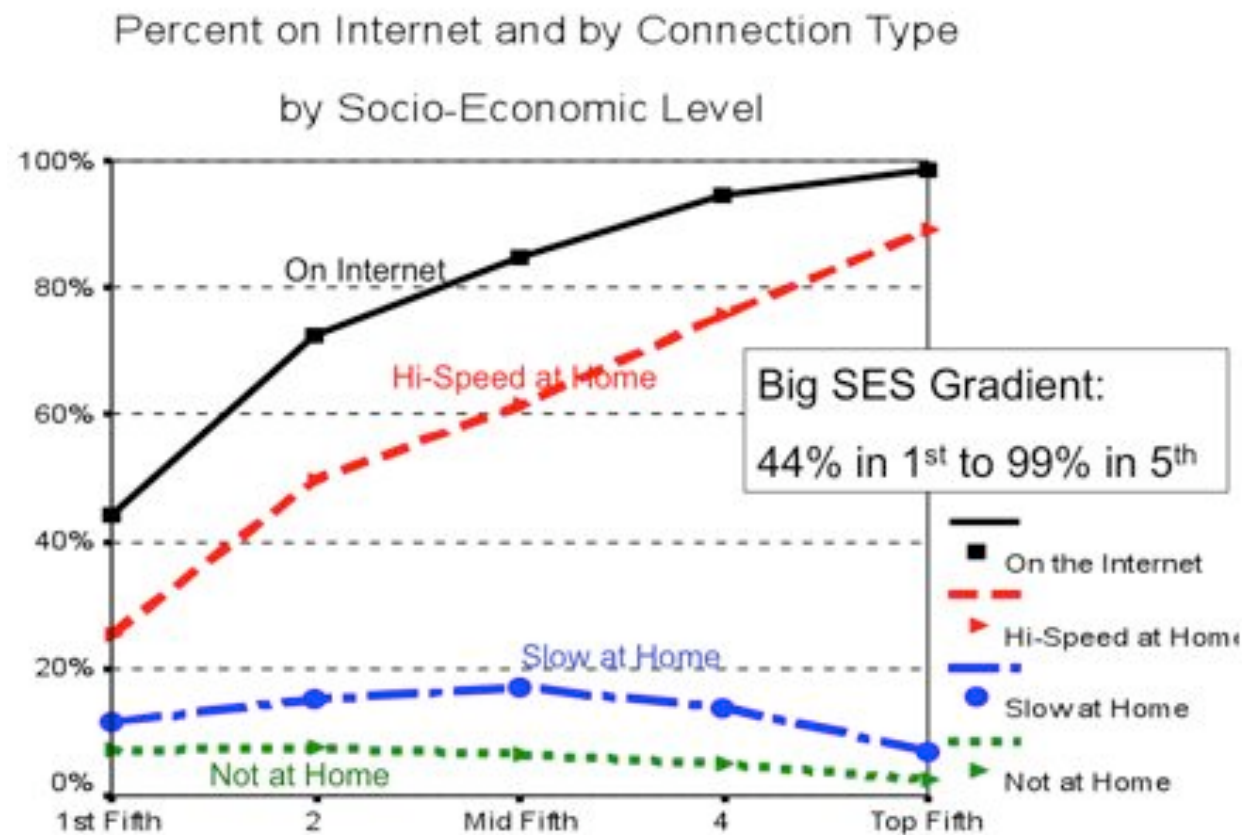
"Hearth Languages" of Right and Left

***progressives* in Google News archives, 1900-2010**





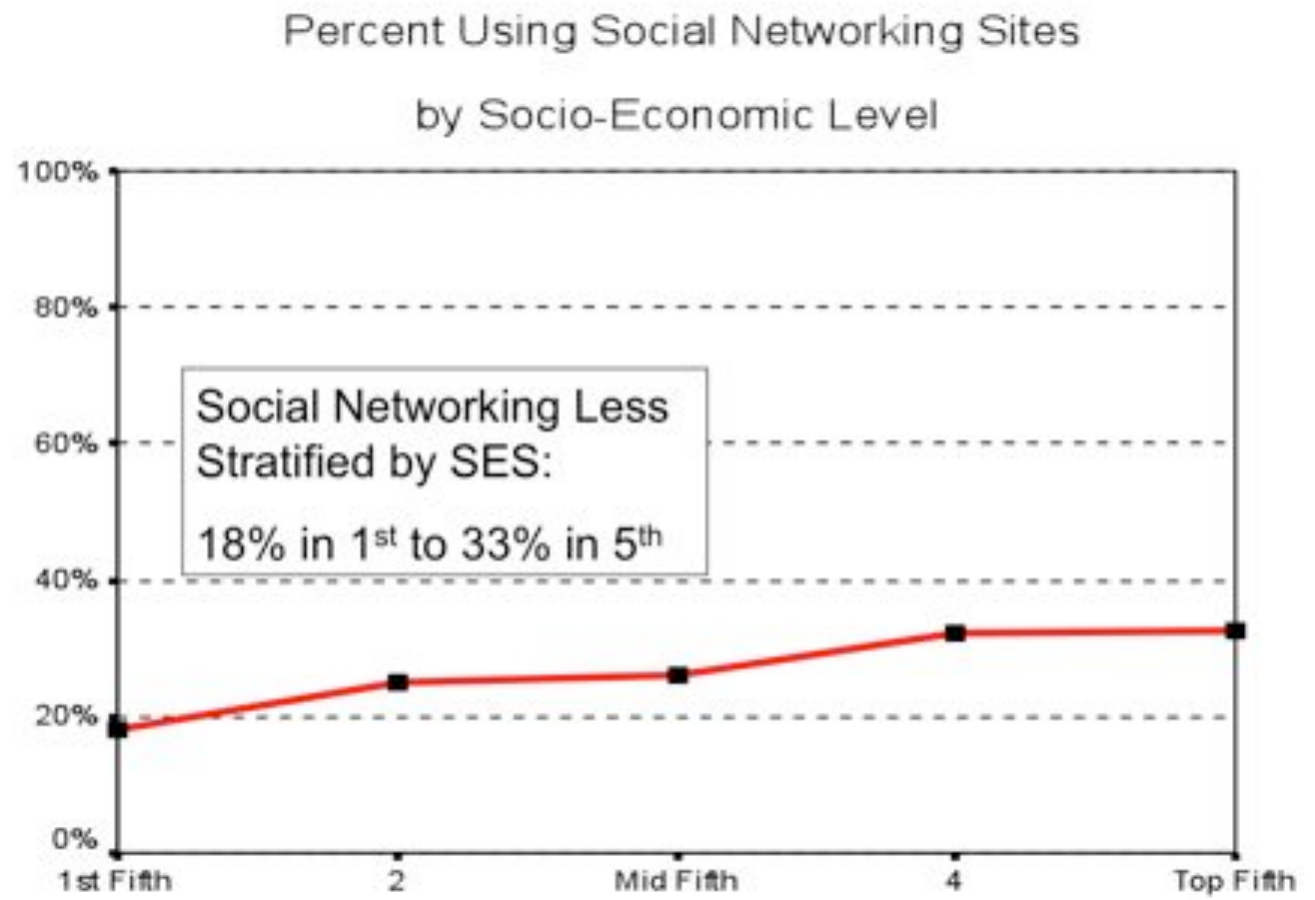
Political Participation Online



Courtesy of Henry Brady



Political Participation Online





Political Participation Online

