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# Taxes, Welfare and Democratic Discourse: Mainstream Media Coverage and the Rise of the American New Right

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## Abstract

Research demonstrates that news media can shape mass opinion on specific public policy issues in politically consequential ways. However, systematic and critical empirical analysis of the ideological diversity of such news coverage is rare. Scholars have also illuminated how and why U.S. economic and social welfare policy has shifted rightward in recent decades, but they have failed to consider media's role in shaping public opinion to democratically legitimate this major reorientation of political economy to favor business and upper-income constituencies. I combine neo-Gramscian theorizations of hegemony, popular common sense and articulation with social scientific research on framing, priming and psychological ambivalence to examine mainstream news coverage of two key policy debates during the neoliberal era: 1) the Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981, and 2) the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996.

Quantitative content analyses of network television and mass-market print news indicates that: 1) coverage focused on a procedural, strategic and tactical narrative that relied overwhelmingly on official sources and included little policy substance. This discourse normalized an elite-centered politics that resonates with and confirms strands of American common sense that support popular civic disengagement, and 2) neoliberal-New Right themes valorizing market imperatives and demonizing social provision dominated alternative frames. Qualitative textual analyses of key artifacts of political discourse shows how such hegemonic messages deployed a conservative-populist rhetoric to effectively obscure corporate and upper-income prerogatives by depicting these policy moves as commonsensical projects that advanced ordinary people's material interests and cultural values. Potentially counter-hegemonic interpretations that drew on culturally resonant fragments of common sense to offer strong challenges to the center-right elite consensus

were propagated, but mainstream news virtually ignored these messages. As a result, citizens lacked effective access to a diverse range of messages and to critical information that might have generated more opposition to the right turn in opinion polls. In an experiment, I show that exposure to strongly hegemonic news treatments can cause even low- and middle-income people and those with egalitarian tendencies to express support for neoliberal-New Right economic policies, and that less strongly hegemonic coverage can prompt significantly more opposition.

Thus, a more substantive and ideologically diverse mainstream media landscape probably would have resulted in a much less supportive climate of mass opinion at key historical moments during the rise of the neoliberal New Right. I argue that hegemonic news coverage helped to shape a political environment that legitimated major concrete policy changes that have exacerbated socioeconomic inequality and strengthened corporate power, and helped to move institutional agendas and the parameters of political discourse significantly to the right. My findings illuminate mass media's role in the neoliberal push against the U.S. welfare and regulatory state, the links between political communication and power relations generally, the need for a more thoughtful and vibrant dialogue between social scientific and critical-cultural approaches to media studies, and the potential for critically oriented and systematic empirical study to challenge the system-supportive presuppositions that often constrain orthodox academic research.

**TAXES, WELFARE AND DEMOCRATIC DISCOURSE: MAINSTREAM MEDIA  
COVERAGE AND THE  
RISE OF THE AMERICAN NEW RIGHT**

By

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DISSERTATION

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## Chapter 1 -- Setting the Stage: Toward a Critical Understanding of Mass Media Coverage and U.S. Domestic Policy

Fresh on the heels of the fiercely disputed 2000 election and facing a Congress closely divided along partisan lines, the administration of U.S. President George W. Bush marshaled through Congress the largest federal tax cut in history. According to polls during the spring and summer, the Economic Growth and Tax Relief Reconciliation Act of 2001 was viewed favorably by formidable public majorities. Moreover, surveys indicated that the plan — which bestowed the bulk of its largess on upper-income and wealthy people, and threatened broadly popular social programs that benefit especially low- and middle-income Americans (Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b; Bartels 2008) — enjoyed strong support from the very groups that stood to gain the least and lose the most. Thus, the administration and its right-wing allies could claim the populist mantle of democratic responsiveness, as citizens — freely expressing their preferences to nonpartisan professional pollsters — signaled their consent to a major policy initiative with far-reaching material and social consequences.

However, the story was not so simple. Deploying a sophisticated communications campaign, Bush administration officials and their allies consistently portrayed the tax plan as a big boost for struggling low- and middle-income people, including unemployed workers, the owners of mom and pop businesses, small farmers and ranchers, and frugal consumers suffering rising gas prices and facing stressful choices in their family budgets. Moreover, the U.S. mass media — operating in a system of vigorous formal press freedoms and in little danger of direct censorship — offered largely uncritical coverage of this policy debate, heavily favoring administration and broadly right-wing sources and interpretations, and rarely including opposition voices (even those of Democratic Party elites). Overall, the discourse circulated through major news outlets was largely characterized by culturally

resonant conservative themes decrying profligate federal bureaucrats and politicians, and promising to supercharge the dynamic free enterprise system by, as the president proclaimed repeatedly, “giving the people their money back.” (Guardino 2007) The implications of this episode for public opinion analysis are clear: polls showing popular backing for government policies — or political arrangements generally — cannot be understood divorced from their powerful cultural and communicative contexts.

This tax plan was just the latest in a string of major U.S. domestic policy moves over the last three to four decades that has shifted public discourse, issue agendas and legislative/administrative outcomes decidedly rightward to comply with the global emergence of a neoliberal economic order.<sup>1</sup> From Ronald Reagan’s initial regressive reconfiguration of the federal tax code in 1981, to Bill Clinton’s follow-through — prodded by Newt Gingrich’s “Republican Revolution” Congress — on his pledge to “end welfare as we know it” in 1996, to Bush’s successful advocacy of top-heavy tax cuts in 2001 and 2003, and his stalled bid to privatize Social Security in 2005, the ideological ground has in a few decades moved far from the limited but significant commitments to collective social provision that marked the New Deal and the Great Society, and toward the glorification of private markets and their ethic of profit-maximization grounded in possessive individualism

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<sup>1</sup> By *neoliberalism*, I mean broadly “a theory of political-economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” (Harvey 2005: 2). Neoliberalism, as it has risen to political-economic and socio-cultural preeminence across the world — albeit unevenly, not without resistance, and with crucial differences owing to specific national contexts — has entailed a number of concrete policy changes. In the United States, these have focused on supporting and promoting private markets by redirecting government action in business regulation, taxation, labor-management relations and social welfare provision, including moves to expose public functions to market discipline. As I elaborate in Chapter 2, I understand neoliberalism *not* as the increased separation of the state from the market, or as a withdrawal of the state from the private sphere. Rather, neoliberalism is a politically generated reconfiguration of social relations that has involved a *reorientation* of state functions toward the promotion of capitalist markets through various economic and cultural mechanisms, which has in many cases involved the intensification of formal government power and control (see Gramsci’s [2005 (1971): 160] statement on the thoroughly political character even of 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century laissez-faire capitalism; see Soss et al. [2009: 15] on how these processes have applied to U.S. social provision during the neoliberal era). As I show through discourse analyses of the 1981 tax and 1995-1996 welfare policy debates in Chapters 5 and 7, this conceptualization highlights the contradictions that suffuse neoliberalism’s anti-state rhetoric and its promotion of “freedom” and “choice.”

(Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005; Baker 2007).<sup>2</sup> In light of the striking rise in domestic economic inequality (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Baker 2007) — which both encouraged and was aided by government policy shifts in support of neoliberalism — the rise of the New Right over recent decades has constituted a key historical conjuncture in U.S. class politics.<sup>3</sup> Major changes in how Americans understand and experience the relationships between the state and the market have occurred, with effects that promise to be relatively enduring — and disabling to aspirations for social democracy and egalitarian notions of economic justice.

Scholars of American politics have produced insightful work on these policy changes, associated socioeconomic trends and their implications for citizen engagement with government, and many have examined the puzzles surrounding the ambivalent and ambiguous shape of mass domestic public opinion in this era (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Bartels 2008; Page and Jacobs 2009). Some have called attention to an apparent disconnect between most citizens' basic economic and social welfare policy commitments, on the one hand, and the elite-level conservative turn, on the other, raising questions about the effectiveness of popular sovereignty and democratic accountability (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 2002), and especially addressing the troubling role of class-rooted inequalities in

<sup>2</sup> On “possessive individualism” and its deeply rooted conflation of market-derived ownership relations with democratic conceptions of political freedom, see MacPherson (1962).

<sup>3</sup> By the *New Right*, I mean a political-ideological movement constituted by a variety of social groups and institutions — e.g. corporate backed-think tanks and interest groups, media outlets and, ultimately, the core of the national Republican Party organization — whose major blocs are generally linked by a shared goal of deploying state power to implement policy changes that would (directly or indirectly) consolidate and support neoliberal material arrangements and forms of consciousness. There are certainly many tensions and contradictions within the broad American New Right coalition — for example, between libertarians averse to state regulation of sexual relations, and conservative Christians advocating vigorous government action to police public morals and uphold traditional values, and between nativist civil society elements hostile to globalization, and the transnational business sector deploying a multi-culturalist rhetoric in its drive for cheap labor and new markets. However, I argue that the New Right over the last 30 to 40 years generally has resolved and submerged these incoherencies to the point where it has been remarkably effective in accomplishing many key policy and ideological goals — by controlling state apparatuses directly, and by co-opting or strategically repositioning potential opposition elements (e.g., in the national Democratic Party) under a hegemonic project broadly in tune with neoliberal principles. Throughout this study, I employ the terms “right-wing” and “right-leaning” frequently to denote ideas and policies favored by the New Right. Unless otherwise noted, I use these labels interchangeably with “conservative,” while taking care when appropriate to clarify key differences that separate the New Right from earlier forms of American conservatism. In this study, I understand the term “right-wing” according to the succinct definition offered by the sociologist Sara Diamond (1995: 9): “To be right-wing means to support the state in its capacity as *enforcer* of order and to oppose the state as *distributor* of wealth and power downward and more equitably in society.”

political voice, participation and policy outcomes (Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005).

However, scholars have yet to systematically explore the role of mainstream media in this story, in particular the ways in which the news represents economic and social welfare policy, and what this might mean for how ordinary Americans think about — and ultimately, how they act politically in relation to — these issues. Existing accounts of the rightward policy drift focus on alternations in partisan control of government (Bartels 2008), corporate campaign spending and its effects on the national Democratic Party (Ferguson and Rogers 1986), or internal political strategies and policy design gimmicks mastered by the ultra-conservative GOP leadership (Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b). But there has been little empirical scholarship that examines how news coverage may have shaped the specific policy preferences that Americans express in public opinion polls to favor the conservative turn. Thus, illuminating the role of mass communications in generating a measure of popular consent during this period of reaction against the U.S. welfare and regulatory state is one of my primary goals.

Beyond the particular political and policy dynamics of the last few decades, however, my study engages questions of a larger scope regarding both the potential and the limits of democratic discourse in the contemporary media communications environment. Theory and research from a number of scholarly traditions depict a mass-mediated “public sphere” (Habermas 1989 [1962]) that stifles democratic possibilities by failing to offer diverse interpretations and relevant information that would help people assert more effective political control over their lives. But no one has drawn on these insights to construct a systematic critical conceptual framework, and apply this framework to concrete policy discourse as manifested in news coverage and elite rhetoric during a crucial historical period.

In another line of scholarship, political psychology researchers have produced an impressive canon on the micro-level mechanisms through which people encounter media messages and construct attitudes, but they have generally avoided questions of how these mental processes may operate to enable and constrain the power of dominant actors and institutions to shape ideological consciousness. Thus, I aim to shed light on the capacity of elite communications to influence public opinion in order to cultivate support for policies and political arrangements, and consequently, to draw out some of the broader democratic capacities and liabilities of news media in contemporary contexts of unequal power relations.

Carrying out this research enterprise, I argue, requires melding theoretical perspectives on mass communication and public opinion that have conventionally been situated at odds with each other. Mainstream social scientific scholarship offers a number of keen conceptual and methodological tools for collecting and analyzing evidence on the contours of media coverage, and on the psychological processes through which people engage with the news and express political opinions and perceptions. However, these paradigms are generally grounded in a positivist and behaviorist epistemological tradition that relies almost exclusively on quantitative techniques and tends to discourage the explicit consideration of normative dimensions or the critical interpretation of research findings. Thus, such approaches — despite their considerable insights — have significant blind spots for understanding how news media operates in larger sociopolitical contexts characterized by an uneasy mix of democratic values and practices, on the one hand, and deeply rooted power asymmetries, on the other. Certain critically oriented political and social theorists — such as Charles Lindblom (1977, 2001) and Steven Lukes (2005 [1974]) — have conceptualized communicative and ideational power in ways that begin to open up these questions from compelling angles. But ultimately, I argue, illuminating the democratic possibilities and



limitations of the mass media as it pertains to public opinion in the contemporary United States calls for a sustained engagement with neo-Gramscian approaches that focus on the related material and cultural dynamics of ideological domination and contestation. These theoretical perspectives, which are founded on a rejection of positivist epistemology and an affinity for qualitative methods, exhibit, nonetheless, striking correspondences with certain social scientific approaches to mass communications and political psychology. This largely unexplored conceptual relationship suggests the possibility for a fruitful cross-pollination to assist empirical investigation of media discourse and mass policy opinion during key historical conjunctures.

I work through this theoretical perspective in a multi-method project that comprises:

1) Comparative case studies employing quantitative content analyses and semiotic textual interpretations to explore two important episodes of economic and social welfare policy debate during the rise of the New Right — a) The Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 (and its associated domestic budget cuts), and b) The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (i.e. “welfare reform”). 2) An experimental analysis to investigate the psychological mechanisms through which such media discourse might shape public opinion — thus generating signs of consent for neoliberal policy moves — and the individual-level factors that facilitate or inhibit the power of media to operate in this way.

I demonstrate that U.S. mainstream news media — despite professional, popular and academic understandings that position it as a neutral arbiter of political ideas — covered these key episodes in ways that systematically favored neoliberal-New Right cultural interpretations and policy perspectives. The evidence that I uncover in my multi-method case studies suggests strongly that public opinion toward the Reagan economic plan and toward welfare reform would have been considerably less supportive had the mass media

(which is the key source of political information and policy arguments for the vast majority of Americans) offered more balanced, diverse and expansive depictions. My experiment shows that news discourse similar to what I found in the case studies can indeed shape poll results in the ways that I theorize, cultivating support for neoliberal-New Right economic and social welfare policies among popular constituencies — such as low- and middle-income people, and those who express strong values of socioeconomic egalitarianism — who otherwise would oppose such moves.

Most political science treatments of the effects of news coverage on public opinion are relatively untroubled by the normative implications of communications influence: the existence of political parties that vie for the allegiance of voters — and the free play of diverse interest groups in the implicitly pluralistic conception of American politics that underlies these studies — typically lead researchers to presume that message “competition” (particularly in the realm of domestic policy) neutralizes any undemocratic influence on citizens (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b). But my empirical findings — based on detailed, extensive and historically contextualized analyses of news content, combined with exploration of the causal impacts of realistic mainstream media coverage on mass policy preferences — cast serious doubt on these assumptions.<sup>4</sup>

Mass communication scholars working in both a critical-cultural and in a social scientific context have called for empirical studies that bridge their formidable theoretical

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<sup>4</sup> An odd bifurcation of labor seems to characterize much of the social scientifically oriented wing of political communication studies. On the one hand, researchers who focus most closely on the effects of news coverage on public opinion have drawn on psychological paradigms to produce impressive accounts of the processes and mechanisms that link mass communications to citizen attitudes. However, these scholars often make questionable assumptions about what news content actually looks like (and about the influences that shape what appears in the media). This has generally led them to a sanguine view of the democratic implications of these processes (e.g. Zaller 1992; Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b). On the other hand, those who focus more on the contours of news coverage and the forces that shape that content have employed sociologically oriented approaches to produce compelling evidence of the anti-democratic character of media coverage (e.g. Bennett et al. 2007; Page 1996). The relatively few scholars who have merged empirical investigations of elite discourse, media content and public opinion with explicit normative analyses regarding the health of American democracy generally have emerged with pessimistic conclusions (e.g. Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Gilens 1999).

divides to engage the propagation, circulation, acceptance and rejection of dominant ideological understandings on multiple levels of analysis (Page and Shapiro 1992; Reese 2001; Tankard 2001; Carragee and Roefs 2004; Van Dijk 2006; Entman 2007). However, few have taken up this challenge, which can be summarized in Turner's (2003 [1990]: 171) question, "how does one meaning win credibility and acceptance while alternative meanings are downgraded and marginalized?"<sup>5</sup> Empirical scholars in some domains of American politics research have also exhibited a growing concern with the political implications of rising socioeconomic inequality, and have called for more cross-theoretical examination of the links between elite discourse, news coverage and public opinion in our historical context of business regulatory and social welfare policy retrenchment (see, e.g., Mettler and Soss 2004).

Thus, my project is a small step in the necessary task of building a trans-disciplinary mass communication research agenda that is theoretically and methodologically pluralistic, and thus able to train its sights on normatively inflected questions that implicate media studies, public opinion and political psychology, public policy, political economy and social theory. Ultimately, what appears in major news venues has crucial implications for people's material conditions and socio-political capacities. That should be reason enough for scholars to challenge the obstacles that have blocked theoretically rich, empirically grounded and critically informed analysis.

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In the next chapter, I elaborate the conceptual framework for my study, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of both social scientific approaches to mass communication and political psychology, and critical-cultural approaches to media, discourse analysis and

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<sup>5</sup> See Lewis (2001) and Gorham (1999) for compelling exceptions.

popular consciousness. I argue that expanding our knowledge of how news coverage can shape citizen consent for public policies and political arrangements requires melding elements of both approaches. And I offer a particular theoretical recipe for understanding these processes that draws on a major paradigm in empirical-psychological public opinion studies — John Zaller’s (1992) *question-answering model*, as applied through theories of *framing* and *priming* — and a major critical-cultural paradigm concerning how ideological power operates in mass consciousness — Antonio Gramsci’s (2005 [1971]) conceptualization of *hegemony* and *popular common sense*, as applied through Stuart Hall’s (1985) theory of *articulation*. I also sketch the historical context of my project and explain the *critical-realist* ontological-epistemological perspective from which I work, which relaxes the tensions between conventional scientific and cultural approaches to political communication research. Chapter 3 lays out my research design and describes my methodology, including my quantitative content analytical scheme, my textual interpretation framework, and the basic logic of my media experiment.

Chapters 4 through 7 comprise my policy case studies — the tax and budget plan of 1981 and the welfare reform legislation of 1996. Here, I combine thorough quantitative analyses of mass media coverage with qualitative discourse analyses of key political texts using the categories of critical semiotics. I demonstrate how the ideological interplay of hegemony and popular common sense was manifested in the concrete shape of news coverage and political rhetoric during these policy episodes, placing media content in a specific historical context characterized by unequal power relations, and suggesting how these climates of news coverage implicate public opinion, mass political engagement and the promises of democracy.

In Chapter 8, I present the results of an experimental media effects analysis that draws on the findings from my case studies. Here, I show that exposure to different forms of news discourse cultivates different ideological understandings of politics and different public policy preferences, interpreting these findings through Zaller's and Gramsci's surprisingly complementary analytical prisms. I also discuss what my empirical results suggest about the relationship between individual-level demographic and psychological factors, on the one hand, and larger processes of political and social power, on the other.

In the final chapter, I review my study, assess its contributions and limitations, and show how my findings confirm and challenge existing literature on media, public opinion and the conservative policy shift. I also discuss what my theoretical framework and empirical evidence suggest about the specifically communicative dimensions of potential challenges to the New Right hegemony, about how we conduct media and other research, and about the prospects for practically engaged yet rigorous social science in a troubling era for democracy and economic justice.

## Chapter 2 -- Critical Media Theory and U.S. Public Policy: Conceptual Linkages and Historical Conditions

### I. Introduction

In this chapter, I elaborate the theoretical bases and historical background for my study of mass media discourse on economic and social welfare policy, and the role this news coverage has played in cultivating popular consent during the rise of the American New Right under neoliberalism. I begin by situating my project in existing accounts of the conservative shift in domestic policy over recent decades. I survey studies that focus on partisan control of government, policy design and legislative strategy, and campaign mobilization by business interests, highlighting the need for systematic work on mainstream media's role in shaping a favorable climate of mass opinion.

I then identify the considerable insights and limitations of mainstream social scientific accounts of public policy news coverage. I follow by discussing some theorists who pushed the epistemological, conceptual and normative boundaries of conventional paradigms, opening up intriguing angles by which to both explain and critique mass communication as a mechanism of social domination. Next, I elaborate the neo-Gramscian concepts of *negative* and *positive ideology*, *hegemony*, and *popular common sense* that constitute one plank of the theoretical platform on which I build my analysis. I follow by explaining my proposed synthesis of these critical-cultural understandings with social scientific-psychological notions of media *framing* and *priming*, adding the second plank.

After this conceptual discussion, I proceed to reconstruct the historical context of the rise of the New Right in the United States against the backdrop of the emerging neoliberal era of globalizing capitalism. I outline some of the instrumental political currents, major concrete policies and central discursive constructions that keyed the resurgence of

conservative forces to governmental and ideological dominance from the late 1970s onward. This discussion sets the stage for my multi-method empirical case studies of news coverage and political discourse in Chapters 4 through 7.

The last pages of this chapter offer an explanation of my epistemological and methodological perspective. I rely on the *critical realist* paradigm to bridge orthodox approaches to communication grounded in positivist assumptions, on the one hand, and cultural approaches to political discourse informed by a critical post-positivist orientation, on the other. This section — which distinguishes my work from common understandings of both discursive postmodernism and scientific empiricism — sets the stage for the more detailed discussion of research design and techniques presented in Chapter 3.

## **II. Economic Inequality and American Politics: Explaining the Rightward Shift**

Scholars have produced compelling accounts of the rightward swing in U.S. economic and social welfare policy since the late 1970s, connecting these changes to emerging socioeconomic trends — especially, the steep rise in income and wealth inequality — and to the shifting dynamics of political institutions. Many authors have explored the implications of the conservative trend for citizen engagement with government, raising questions about popular sovereignty and democratic accountability, and emphasizing in particular the troubling role of class-rooted inequalities in political voice, participation and policy outcomes (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 2002; Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b, 2010; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005; Bartels 2008; Page and Jacobs 2009). However, scholars of American politics have yet to systematically explore the role of mainstream media in this historical narrative, in particular the ways in which news coverage — and the political discourse that it draws upon — might have shaped public attitudes to favor the rightward policy trend at key historical junctures.

Existing accounts of the conservative swing in economic and social welfare policy that examine mass opinion focus on partisan control of government, the timing of short-term economic growth to coincide with Republican electoral victories and unequal policy responsiveness (Bartels 2008); corporate campaign spending and its effects on the agenda of the national Democratic Party (Ferguson and Rogers 1986); and internal political strategies and policy design tactics deployed by the ultra-conservative GOP leadership cadre (Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b). These works tend to agree that Americans exhibit “programmatically liberalism” (Ferguson and Rogers 1986) or “pragmatic egalitarianism” (Page and Jacobs 2009) — i.e., while most people express abstract opposition to big government and support for private economic markets, survey results on general policy direction show solid support for progressive taxation and for many areas of social spending and business regulation (see also Page and Shapiro 1992, Ch. 4). Consequently, scholars — working from an initial normative presumption of democratic responsiveness — seek to understand how governing elites could nevertheless consistently enact specific programs that pull sharply in the opposite direction.

While these accounts are compelling and largely persuasive on their own terms — and while some touch on the role of the news media — none squarely engage the concrete interpretations and information about the economy, social welfare and democratic politics that Americans have been exposed to during the conservative shift. We do not know why — despite solid evidence of the public’s pragmatic egalitarianism — large polling majorities have, in most cases, continued to express support for particular policies entailing significant cuts in social provision and regressive tax code reconfigurations. There is reason to suspect that media influence may have played an important role, however. We have evidence that national political elites — contrary to their nearly universal insistence that they do not



govern by polls — increasingly (and in increasingly sophisticated ways) attempt to shape public opinion to legitimate policy stances that are favored by core ideological and financial supporters (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000, 2002; Jacobs 2005, 2011). In contemporary American politics, the ability to claim plausibly that “the people” are on one’s side can be a powerful weapon for presidential administrations and congressional leaders, a weapon that can complement internal bargaining, procedural maneuvering and policy design strategies. And, as I explain in Sections III and IV, we also know that mass communications can have significant — though limited — effects on public attitudes as expressed in polls: while media voices lack the capacity to bend popular preferences at will, their discourse can shape climates of opinion under certain individual-level and contextual conditions.

However, scholars have yet to synthesize this knowledge about the ambiguity and apparent inconsistency of public attitudes toward the conservative policy shift, the significance of polling in contemporary U.S. politics, and processes of mass communications influence, to produce concrete empirical analyses examining precisely how news coverage — and the largely elite interpretations it circulates — may have contributed to the generation of a significant measure of popular consent during this historically pivotal period of reaction against the American welfare and regulatory state. My study seeks to do so by drawing on surprisingly complementary conceptual insights and methodological tools from social scientific research and critical-cultural theory. I turn now to this theoretical background.

### **III. Mass Media Coverage of Public Policy Issues: Potential Elite Manipulation?**

Much scholarship in recent decades has examined news content on U.S. public policy issues and the forces that shape that coverage. And a wide range of this theorizing and research suggests that contemporary mass media environments are characterized by ideologically cramped and information-poor coverage that stifles capacities for popular

political agency and engagement. Unfortunately, however, communications scholars in the social scientific tradition generally have not built on this evidence and insight to pursue empirical studies designed specifically to explore the democratic quality of media discourse in terms of its capacity to represent ideological contestation during contemporary policymaking episodes.

Studies have demonstrated that major U.S. media tend to restrict their coverage to reflect the range of debate among national Democratic and Republican Party elites, and also to emphasize and multiply the voices that communicate these perspectives by selecting sympathetic nongovernmental sources (Bennett 1990, 1996, 2009 [1983]; see also Hallin 1994; Bennett et al. 2006, 2007; Zaller and Chiu, 1996). A number of organizational routines and professional norms and practices lead journalists to rely so heavily on officially sanctioned sources for information and policy perspectives, operating to reinforce mainstream news outlets' close ties to centers of institutional political power (Sigal 1973; Gans 1979; Shoemaker 1991; Cook 1998; Bennett 2009 [1983]). Media coverage of interest groups and social movement organizations tends to favor the largest and wealthiest lobbies, and to depict protests and demonstrations sparsely and negatively, sidelining substantive policy demands and political perspectives (Danielian and Page 1994; Thrall 2006; Gitlin 1980; McLeod and Hertog 1992; Wittebols 1996). Mainstream news content — especially television coverage — also is characterized by general narrative formulas and communications codes that marginalize policy substance and the institutional or structural context of political and social problems, possibly cultivating mass depoliticization and deference to established nodes of power (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Iyengar 1991; Bennett 2009 [1983]; Bourdieu 1998; Gerbner et al. 2002; Shanahan and Morgan 1999). Finally, theory and empirical research on the political economy of mass media suggests that

for-profit corporate control — especially increasing conglomeration and commercialization — serves to reproduce and intensify all these news coverage tendencies (Smythe 2002 [1981]; Herman and Chomsky 1988; Parenti 1989, 1993; McChesney 1999, 2004; McAllister 2002; Bagdikian 2004). However, mainstream political communication researchers have offered little systematic elaboration or analysis of what such news production and content patterns might suggest about the larger possibilities for — and the limitations on — democratic mass media discourse on public policy issues in the contemporary era.

Page and Shapiro's (1992) distinction between elite "education" and "manipulation" of public opinion offers one promising analytical platform for addressing these questions by building on social scientific understandings of media content and attitude formation while foregrounding crucial questions that are usually left to explicitly normative political theorists and social critics. For these scholars, *education* is encouraged when officials and relevant institutions — such as news outlets — present a sufficient quantity of accurate and relevant information, and a wide enough spectrum of views, commentary and interpretations, such that the public is likely to express policy choices resembling those "it would make if it were fully and completely informed." (Page and Shapiro 1992: 356) Conversely, *manipulation* is furthered when elites and media offer incorrect or deceptively selective information and an ideologically constricted range of interpretations: under such conditions, policy opinions are expected to diverge from those people would hold if they were aware of all relevant information and analysis. To be sure, these scholars understand their categories to be grounded in a thought experiment — in other words, they acknowledge that "full information" is a practical (and perhaps a conceptual) impossibility. Nevertheless, for Page and Shapiro (1992) the implicit democratic ideal — which we ought to try to approximate — consists of "autonomous preferences," i.e. expressed opinions that flow from open

collective deliberations under conditions of discursive equality, free from ideational domination by the state, corporations and other powerful actors, institutions and interests.

Also working in the social scientific mode of political communications and public opinion research, Zaller (1992: 313) offers a definition of “elite domination” that closely tracks Page and Shapiro’s conceptualization: “A situation in which elites induce citizens to hold opinions they would not hold if they were aware of the best available information and analysis.”<sup>1</sup> But in the epilogue to his conceptual treatise on attitude formation, he offers just a bare sketch of the possibilities for elite domination, concluding cautiously that the purported ideological diversity of expert voices in the chains of news production — combined with robust partisan elite competition — makes such domination unlikely in contemporary American politics. Nevertheless, Zaller — whose seminal theoretical work on the micro-mechanisms of opinion formation I discuss in Section VI — suggests that sustained empirical analysis of the possibilities for elite domination of public opinion is in order.

Still, few empirical researchers have heeded the call for studies to help us better understand how discursive power operates in concrete political contexts, and how mass communications processes can encourage or stifle capacities for popular control of public policy. As Lewis (2001: 102) writes, “the relation between the information commonly made available within a culture through the media and the ‘will of the people’ remains relatively unexplored.”<sup>2</sup> Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) offer a rich case study-based account of elite

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<sup>1</sup> See also Mansbridge (1980: 25), Connolly (1993 [1974]: 64) and (Dahl 1989: 180) for similar perspectives from normative political theory on the conceptual shape of autonomous or authentic preferences in the context of democratic principles and practices.

<sup>2</sup> This is an area in which the balance between abstract theorizing — even by scholars operating generally within mainstream social scientific traditions — and concrete analysis is heavily weighted toward the former. See the essays in Margolis and Mauser (1989) and Le Cheminant and Parrish (2011) for some promising conceptualizations and empirical ventures. See Lau and Redlawsk (2006) and Lau et al. (2008) for related attempts to empirically study the determinants of what the authors label “correct voting.”

manipulation of public opinion through strategic communications offensives mounted by partisan actors in U.S. politics. They elaborate the concept of “crafted talk” to describe the rhetorical tactics that political elites deploy in order to cultivate polling results that signal apparent mass consent for public policy goals desired by narrow and powerful interests, which these elites may then point to as evidence of democratic legitimation. Particularly since the start of the Reagan era, partisan actors and interest groups — especially presidential administrations — have spent increasing sums on sophisticated polling and focus group research, psychological training, and communications technologies to mount such propaganda offensives (Jacobs 2005, 2011). However, while their analysis is based on a model that integrates news coverage in these dynamics of “simulated responsiveness,” Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) do not focus closely on the specific contours of media discourse, and the potential for news media itself to undermine or enhance democratic agency through the content it circulates.

Thus, notwithstanding the promising explorations and tantalizing speculations of a few authors (e.g. Entman 1989; Page 1996), social scientific models of news production and content — for all their considerable strengths — have generated few sharp conceptual categories for evaluating the extent to which mass communications environments may be said to constitute democratic discourse on public policy issues. Consequently, for a number of reasons — methodological, epistemological-theoretical and, perhaps, normative — it appears that no one in this tradition has executed an empirical study aimed precisely at the heart of the matter: to what extent *are* contemporary news environments characterized by something approaching “the best available information and analysis”? To what extent is news coverage during crucial policymaking episodes likely to further “education” that cultivates citizens’ collective capacity for political agency, and to what extent is this content

likely to encourage “manipulation” of public opinion that stifles these popular-democratic potentials? I suggest that social scientists who study media often lack theoretical resources for tackling these questions, as well as the inclination for the intensive and multidimensional empirical analysis that would be required.

Many mainstream scholars of political communication who otherwise have produced valuable accounts of news coverage and public opinion seem to hold normative presuppositions about the pluralistic nature of American politics — particularly during domestic policy debates — that foreclose systematic investigation of potentially anti-democratic influences on popular attitudes (see, e.g., Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b on the baseline expectation of “frame competition”). But the conceptual and practical importance of democratic discourse in the contemporary mass communications context calls for much more attention than these matters have been given. News coverage of political and social affairs is an inherently evaluative phenomenon, and attempts to study it within conventional scientific-empiricist paradigms — for all the insights they generate — are significantly limited because their theoretical and methodological assumptions discourage forthright engagement with questions of power relations. A wider analytic framework is required for empirical analysis of media coverage centered on its potential to reflect and promote ideologically diverse patterns of democratic contestation.

#### **IV. Critical-Liberal Theories of Elite Influence: An Entry Point for Media as a Mechanism of Power**

A few theorists on the left edge of the liberal-democratic tradition have shed considerable light on processes that resemble what communication researchers have termed mass-mediated elite “manipulation” or “domination” of public opinion. These scholars have offered perceptive and imaginative analyses of mass communications as a mode of power

that cements dominant political-economic relations by cultivating popular consent. Because they are skeptical of the pluralist assumptions that inform conventional understandings of American politics and are troubled by many aspects of the capitalist state-corporate nexus, they have been more willing than most political scientists and scientifically oriented communication scholars to entertain the possibility that anti-democratic power relations might operate through the linkages between mass media and public opinion. But lingering epistemological-methodological roadblocks make concrete empirical analysis based on the concepts they elaborate difficult to execute.

For example, Lindblom's notions of the "circularity" of preferences (ibid: 1977) and the "assault on the mind" (ibid: 2001) that characterize contemporary polyarchies offer critical leverage on how communications dynamics sustain and justify unequal power relations and social domination. In these accounts by a scholar who was once a leading advocate of pluralist theory, political and business elites are consistently able to shape mass preferences in ways that are detrimental to popular interests — and in turn use these constructed attitudes as democratic legitimations in a dynamic akin to Jacobs and Shapiro's (2000) "simulated responsiveness." Despite considerable freedom of debate and information — especially on issues not closely tied to fundamental economic and foreign policy commitments — Lindblom argues that elite control of ideas and communication is widespread and significant:

Core beliefs are the product of a rigged, lopsided competition of ideas...It is difficult for citizens who enjoy that freedom to remind themselves of how unequal the competition of ideas is and of how far governments still fall short of achieving a larger liberation of men's minds to accomplish the degree of popular control that only then might be possible (Lindblom 1977: 212-13).

Lindblom reserves a crucial role for mass media institutions and processes as sites for reproducing preference circularity. His ideas clearly resonate with Page and Shapiro's (1992)

emphasis on misleading and ideologically constricted messages as constitutive of political communications environments that undermine democratic values and practices.<sup>3</sup>

Lukes' "third dimension of power" (2005 [1974]) offers another promising critical lens for understanding how mass communications operates as a mechanism by which dominant social interests cultivate legitimacy, generate popular consent and assert political control. For Lukes, power works not only through the exercise or threat of raw force and coercion, or the explicit enforcement of binding decisions (the first dimension), and the institutional constriction of choice and issue agendas (the second dimension), but also through constraining influences on ideological consciousness.<sup>4</sup> While scholars have persuasively critiqued Lukes' account on ontological-epistemological grounds,<sup>5</sup> his depiction of the "three faces of power" constitutes an important philosophical, methodological and substantive interrogation of many assumptions in positivist, behaviorist and pluralist views of politics.

In a similar vein, Edelman's (1967, 1977, 1988, 2001) work on "symbolic politics" has added significant critical inflections to American mass communications and public policy theory. His social constructionist account — which draws from continental European theories of language in the post-structuralist tradition — is centered on the maintenance of dominant power relations and worldviews through mass-mediated "spectacles" and rituals that foster popular quiescence, and reinforce privilege for wealthy and well-organized social forces. Though occasionally panned as simplistic and unsystematic, Edelman's work

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Lindblom (2001: 223): "Elites defend their political communications as a contribution to a competition of ideas such as has been prized in liberal and democratic thought. But the competition of ideas works, if at all, only when several conditions are met. First, the messages must challenge each other. And, in the contestation, loud voices must not silence others. Third, each of the contesting messages must contain some empirical content. Finally, the contestants must not depart too far from a respect for the truth. All of these conditions are in varying degrees violated in elite political messages."

<sup>4</sup> As Lukes (2005 [1974: 27] writes: "To put the matter sharply, *A* may exercise power over *B*...by influencing, shaping or determining his very wants. One does not have to go to the lengths of talking about *Brave New World*, or the world of B.F. Skinner, to see this: thought control takes many less total and more mundane forms, through the control of information, through the mass media and through the processes of socialisation."

<sup>5</sup> See Isaac (1987).



insightfully draws attention to how seemingly free political discourse can operate as a form of ideological control that stunts mass democratic potential.

These critical conceptualizations of mass communications as a mode of ideational power brought long-overdue explicit consideration of structurally rooted class and corporate political influence to larger audiences in American social science at a time when such ideas sat uncomfortably with prevailing images of a “balanced” system where power was widely dispersed — and media had little or no significant implications for popular perceptions and behavior, damaging or otherwise.<sup>6</sup> They also offered new theoretical vocabularies for discussing the larger social and political importance of the daily torrent of images and words in newspapers, TV programs, magazines and other media. But despite the aspirations of these theorists and their intellectual sympathizers, empirical analysis based on such categories of communicative power has proven difficult to conceive and conduct: systematic, sustained and concrete examination of mass media as a mechanism of ideological control — particularly in the context of U.S. public policy issues — has been rare.<sup>7</sup>

This paucity of research is largely due to a set of interrelated epistemological and methodological obstacles centered on questions of what counts as evidence for third-dimensional power’s effectivity: in Page and Shapiro’s (1992) terminology, how do we know

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<sup>6</sup> In the discipline of American mass communication, this is typically called the “minimal effects” era, which spanned roughly from the 1940s to the late 1960s.

<sup>7</sup> Lukes, a sociologist by training, presented his theory as a counter to behaviorist claims that any conception of power that supposedly operates “invisibly” — i.e. in ways that make it difficult or impossible to observe directly from the standpoint of orthodox notions of science — was unsuitable for empirical study.

Inspired by his doctoral advisor, Gaventa (1980) produced an important historical-empirical study of how power’s third face played out in a severely exploited and marginalized Appalachian mining community. But while news media played a role in this story, Gaventa did not focus in any systematic or sustained way on mass communications. Instead, his work traced the operation of third-dimensional power at multiple levels and social sites over a long stretch of time, in a particular (and particularly isolated) geographic setting, rather than the specific ways in which media — on a national scale — can constitute a social site for the operation of ideological power during a specific historical moment characterized by key policy changes.

While Edelman’s ideas are closely tied to the substance of public policy and the content of the news, he presented them more as a series of critical guides to inspire other theorists and empirical scholars, rather than as a rubric for a concerted research program. Despite some obstacles owing to Edelman’s postmodernist shadings, mass communications scholars influenced by his work have maintained that the theory of symbolic politics he elaborated is not only suitable for empirical analysis, but lends itself to a number of mainstream methodological tools, including quantitative techniques (Bennett 1993a).

what “the best available information and analysis” looks like? And even if we can resolve this thorny issue, how can we ascertain the extent to which Edelman’s mass-mediated “spectacles” actually *caused* audiences to perceive politics in ways that reinforce dominant social relations, or the extent to which the preferences expressed in polls are “authentic” or merely “circular,” in Lindblom’s vocabulary? Social scientists have collided with the limits of their conceptual paradigm: from the standpoint of positivist-empiricist-behaviorist understandings, identifying the “best available information and analysis” and building an empirical account of media coverage and mass opinion based on it seem to be nearly impossible tasks.

How might we collect, analyze and interpret concrete evidence of news content and public attitudes from a conceptual perspective that recognizes discourse as a form of ideological power, and seeks to critically trace its implications for the normative suppositions and aspirations of popular democracy and social agency? Fortunately, there is a long and rich intellectual heritage that, while enmeshed in a very different theoretical context than the one that usually informs American political science research, has for decades been centrally concerned with the power-inflected determinants of political consciousness, including mass communications.

This is the culturalist-materialist current of critical theory, especially strands generated by the Italian leftist dissident Antonio Gramsci and extended by early authors in British Cultural Studies, exemplified by the work of Stuart Hall (1979 [1977], 1980a, 1980b, 1985, 1988). As Hall (1985: 97, 100) phrased the animating concerns of this research as it has understood discourse at sites like the news media:

Why, to a significant degree in many different historical social formations, (have) the dominated classes...used ‘ruling ideas’ to interpret and define their interests(?)...A critical question in developed liberal democracies is precisely how ideology is

reproduced in the so-called *private* institutions of civil society — the theatre of consent — apparently outside the direct sphere of play of the State itself.

My study brings this framework into dialogue with certain social scientific understandings from political psychology to understand how mass media — one of the “so-called private institutions of civil society” — has shaped popular consent for the rightward drift in U.S. economic and social welfare policy during the neoliberal era. Thus, it is to neo-Gramscian cultural theory that I turn next.

## **V. Ideology and Media Reception in Neo-Gramscian Theory: Hegemony and Popular Common Sense**

In an effort to address the limitations of conventional social scientific perspectives on news media discourse, I build on Gramsci’s (2005 [1971]) concepts of *hegemony* and *popular common sense*. These ideas are powerful analytic categories for theorizing and empirically examining contemporary mass communications environments in terms of their capacities to both enable and constrict popular-democratic discourse on public policy issues. In this section, I elaborate my understanding of these concepts and relate their broad connections to media coverage. However, I first briefly outline the general approach to ideology that undergirds Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis.

According to this understanding, dominant ideologies may be seen to operate in what some authors have termed both the *negative* and *positive* registers (see Larrain 1996). In the negative register, ideologies cultivate consent for power arrangements by limiting, constraining and distorting the range of alternative social visions and political possibilities that people are aware of. Ideologies operate in the positive — or “constructive” — dimension by cultivating worldviews that meet people’s perceived material, psychological and cultural needs and aspirations, thereby connecting their everyday lives to some larger social and political vision, or an internally coherent set of narratives about “how the world

works” — and how it ought to work. In both these senses, ideologies are the frameworks of meaning through which people understand and act in the social world.

Gramsci’s rubric for understanding the cultural glue of social relations, which is perhaps his most important and original contribution, offers a lens through we can magnify the *positive* face of ideology as a complement to the negative register stressed in other currents of the historical-materialist tradition. Reacting to orthodox readings of Marx that viewed social relations (and thus, ideological forms and political alignments) as mechanically determined — in a strong sense — by objective economic conditions, Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis posited an alternative understanding that stressed the internal relation of knowing and doing.<sup>8</sup> In this view, ideology is not only destructive and constricting — as it mystifies and obscures social relations — but also *constructive* and *enabling*. In other words, by representing the world in language, imagery, consciousness and practice, ruling ideologies provide a set of more or less coherent cultural understandings, that, while they always legitimate social relations that in the main benefit dominant actors and interests, also simultaneously operate as frameworks through which less powerful actors can meet their perceived cultural, psychological and material demands and aspirations. Thus, only if dominant ideologies resonate at some level with what people understand as their needs, hopes and values can they be relatively effective at securing popular consent for social arrangements and political configurations that solidify and legitimate existing power relations.

On a related plane, Gramsci’s understanding of ideology is importantly distinguished from other currents of the historical-materialist legacy by its non-essentialist insistence on the contingency of social relations — and thus, their amenability to intellectual critique and

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<sup>8</sup> This crucial aspect of the philosophy of praxis also plays a central role in critical-realist epistemology and methodology (Sayer 2010 [1984]).

emancipatory political interventions. As he consistently stressed, outcomes are non-predetermined:

The basic innovation introduced by the philosophy of praxis into the science of politics and history is the demonstration that there is no abstract ‘human nature,’ fixed and immutable...but that human nature is the totality of historically determined social relations, hence an historical fact which can, within certain limits, be ascertained with the methods of philology and criticism. (Gramsci 2005 [1971]: 133)

Gramsci posed an understanding of the complex, mutual interaction of economic-material conditions and political-ideological-cultural arrangements that together form a variegated ensemble of social relations. No single level is reducible to the other, and their particular relationships can only in the end be understood by study with reference to concrete historical contexts.

Thus, unlike some interpretations in the Marxist tradition that see the “base” (i.e. structural economic or material conditions) mechanically determining the “superstructures” (cultural currents, ideological formations, political movements and institutions), in the Gramscian understanding, as Hall (1985) put it, base and superstructure are viewed more as a “metaphor” for — rather than as a “model” of — social relations (see also Williams 2006 [1980]; Rupert 2005):

The structure — the given conditions of existence, the structure of determinations in any situation — can also be understood, from another point of view, as simply the result of previous practices...we make history, but on the basis of anterior conditions which are not of our making... Structures exhibit tendencies — lines of force, openings and closures which constrain, shape, channel and in that sense, ‘determine.’ But they cannot determine in the harder sense of fix absolutely, guarantee. (Hall 1985: 95, 96)

In other words, structure and agency are mutually constitutive — structures both constrict and enable human action, while human action can change structures, even as it is limited (and enabled) by them. So there is “no necessary correspondence” between practices at different levels (economic, cultural, political) of a social formation. This means that ideology

is a “relatively autonomous” sphere of social relations, with real power to influence not only political institutions and cultural practices, but ultimately, the material-economic conditions that constitute the structure (Hall 1985: 113):

It may be ruled out that immediate economic crises of themselves produce fundamental historical events; they can simply create a terrain more favourable to the dissemination of *certain modes of thought*, and *certain ways of posing and resolving questions* involving the entire subsequent development of national life. (Gramsci 2005 [1971]: 184, emphasis added)

Notably, because there are always tensions and latent contradictions along different dimensions of social relations — structure is emergent from practices, and, thus, does not have the coherence or durability of a fully “designed” or planned project — popular struggle against dominant power arrangements is always possible and, in some magnitude, practically evident.<sup>9</sup>

Finally — and crucially in the context of this study — Gramsci’s notion of ideology stands in stark contrast to some orthodox readings of Marx that viewed “science” and “ideology” as mutually contradictory and opposed categories, where science represents the objective Truth of History and social relations, and ideology is mere mystification and obfuscation.<sup>10</sup> This means that his understanding is at odds with the ideas of a “false consciousness” that some have read into the thought of Marx and his colleague Friedrich Engels, which mechanistically determines (in the strong sense) the perceptions of the working class by simply hiding objective social conditions. These understandings (which Hall [1985: 97], drawing on Louis Althusser, critiques from a neo-Gramscian perspective), rest on an unwarranted empiricist rendering of knowledge, where some final Truth can be made

<sup>9</sup> See also Sayer (2010 [1984]: Ch. 3, esp. 96-8) on the relations of structure and agency.

<sup>10</sup> These elements of Gramsci’s thought connect closely to his understanding of the place of “intellectuals” in culture and social relations. While intellectual production (broadly including the work of scientists and professional scholars of all types, journalists, teachers, authors and the like) is not uniquely determined by its historical context — and thus, strictly enslaved to what its contemporary ideologies enable and forbid — this work is inextricably and necessarily bound up with the ideological formations of its historical time and place: thus, there is no objective or disinterested “scientific” insight that can be ripped from the social ensemble of its production and application, and held up as a final and irrefutable Truth to be opposed to some patently “false” ideology.

transparent fully independent of socio-cultural context and the discursive terms in which it is expressed.<sup>11</sup>

Gramsci — and critical theorists influenced by his work — have certainly emphasized the positive dimension of ideology, both because of its pivotal role in their overall epistemological and theoretical framework, and because they were reacting against several related notions in orthodox Marxism revolving around strongly deterministic notions of history, the unquestioned priority of the base over the superstructure (or “economism”), mechanistic views of social relations, the idea of false consciousness, and the binary opposition of science and ideology. However, at the same time, the writings of Gramsci, Hall and others reserve a complementary role for the *negative* register of ideology. In other words, this theoretical framework endorses the notion that dominant thought-systems produce their effects by limiting, constraining and obscuring the social visions that are represented through public discourse, including at sites like mass media. Thus, there are historically contingent, structurally rooted limits to consciousness that — while not determinative in the strong sense — establish ideological parameters of cognition and communication that are difficult to dislodge.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, in Gramsci’s understanding, insurgent ideologies that question, criticize or repudiate the dominant order — what later theorists termed “counter-hegemonic” conceptions — can be effective in mobilizing resistance by circulating oppositional ideas in ways that resonate with aspects of popular cultural understandings, and link up with people’s material conditions and aspirations in ways that generate new political

<sup>11</sup> In any case, the textual warrant in Marx’s writings (and even in Engels’) for the idea of false consciousness — a concept which has been much criticized by those unfamiliar with the Marxist intellectual tradition and those openly opposed to it — is highly questionable (see McCarney 2005).

<sup>12</sup> It is important to emphasize that these concepts do not necessarily imply individual-level motives or conspiratorial bases — ideology in the main operates “behind the backs” of workers, employers, news producers, political elites and everyone else: in other words, while ideological effects result from complex relations among many specific thoughts and actions, they are not reducible to the behavior of particular agents, and their limitations and distortions affect all people, although in particular ways and to particular degrees depending on their social location.

projects. Through patient ideological struggle in many social venues, Gramsci urged a movement toward new popular-democratic conceptions of human relations that ultimately would erode the hierarchical distinctions between “leader” and “led.”<sup>13</sup> This vision of political praxis — which he termed the “war of position” — introduces the key notions of *hegemony* and *popular common sense*, which are the main critical theoretical levers for my analysis of media discourse and mass consent during the rise of the American New Right in the neoliberal era.

While some readings — or misreadings — of the complex body of work that emerged from his stint in a fascist prison during the 1920s and 1930s reduce hegemony to pure domination, Gramsci’s elaboration of this concept is compelling in large part precisely because he recognizes the inevitability of contestation and struggle in contexts of unequal social relations. Hegemony may be defined as the patterned and relatively durable — but never unchallenged or incontestable — reproduction of ideas, language forms and material practices that facilitate popular consent to power arrangements that sustain and promote dominant interests. Hegemony accomplishes this by naturalizing or normalizing dominant understandings as universal values that are in the common interest. In contrast to economically deterministic and mechanistic understandings of Marxism that view ideas, language and other cultural factors as inevitably subordinate epiphenomena to material forces, Gramsci placed a strong emphasis on mass and interpersonal communications as cultural-ideological processes with real and effective power to shape material arrangements, practical social relations and political alignments.

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<sup>13</sup> As Rupert (2005: 488) writes, popular struggle aims at “an emancipatory political culture and a social movement to enact it — not just another hegemony rearranging occupants of superior/subordinate social positions, but a *transformative* counter-hegemony.”



Hegemony operates as a kind of “trench system” at multiple levels and in social domains across the formal state, civil society and economic sector, including families, schools, religious and voluntary organizations, political parties, business firms, government agencies, and the publishing and mass media sectors (which Gramsci termed ideology’s “most prominent and dynamic part” [ibid 1985: 389]).<sup>14</sup> Just as a series of trenches might circle a fortress, repelling invaders, the construction of ideological meaning at these sites protects (always imperfectly and unevenly) the power of dominant social forces localized in the more evidently economic and political apparatuses. Because hegemony is never total or airtight, however, dominant ideologies are not only constructed and fortified through mass communications, but also, to some extent, challenged and resisted: as Makus (1990: 501) puts it, “although ideological formulations are resistant to change, they are not impregnable.” Contingent outcomes of various struggles over ideas — battles which in our historical context largely play out in media discourse — are pivotal for shaping economic and political power relations.<sup>15</sup>

For Gramsci, popular common sense constitutes the multi-dimensional complex of ideas that equips people with conceptual maps for navigating social relations. Effective configurations of common sense operate in people’s consciousness as implicit theories of how they should and do relate to each other and to material life in multiple social venues that gain the force of taken-for-granted assumptions. However, unlike the ideal scientific theories of Gramsci’s time and ours, the popular common sense of any large and heterogeneous society is never seamless or fully internally consistent. Instead, common sense

<sup>14</sup> In Hallin’s (1994: 12) words, Gramscian theories of hegemony in the context of communications propose that “cultural institutions like the media are part of a process by which a world-view compatible with the existing structure of power in society is reproduced, a process which is decentralized, open to contradiction and conflict, but generally very effective.”

<sup>15</sup> In addition to cultural dimensions, hegemony has crucial material faces: for example, hegemonic social groups (e.g., major corporate shareholders) incorporate certain subordinate groups (white-collar, middle-class professionals) in political-economic projects that — while they primarily benefit dominant forces — offer limited material concessions (e.g. salaries sufficient to support comfortable homeownership) in order to generate consent and pre-empt challenge.

is a fragmented and often baldly contradictory amalgam of understandings drawn from various philosophical, religious and political currents that is “sedimented” in consciousness from a lifetime of experiences, including family, school, media and workplace socialization, interpersonal practices and relations, and more proximate encounters with mass communications. Popular common sense — which might include bits of (mis)information, cultural understandings, social narratives, formulas and stereotypes, shaded with degrees of emotional significance — provides people with a potential set of discursive resources for understanding and acting in the world. The hegemony of dominant forces and interests operates in part by capturing or activating socially resonant elements of common sense, thus constructing existing power relations as natural, inevitable or universally beneficial, and limiting or discouraging (though never foreclosing entirely) challenge and resistance.<sup>16</sup>

Because the processes by which hegemony is constructed and cemented (and challenged through counter-hegemonic projects) are historically contingent and, in principle, open-ended, for Gramsci the particular shape and outcomes of these ideological operations are questions that can only be answered through rigorous empirical study, or what Turner (2003 [1990]: 181) calls “concrete practical analysis of ideological formations within cultures.” Indeed, one of Gramsci’s suggestions for beginning such a project was to undertake what scholars today might call content or discourse analyses — along with studies of news production routines — of particular sets of intellectual and popular publications (Gramsci 1985: 388-89). This stress on contingency and emphasis on the potential for contestation stems from Gramsci’s theoretical commitment to a view of human identities, relations and practices as socially and historically constructed — rather than rooted in a fully

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<sup>16</sup> As Rupert (2005: 487-8) puts it, “Gramsci understood popular common sense not to be monolithic or univocal... Rather, common sense was understood to be a syncretic historical residue, fragmentary and contradictory, open to multiple interpretations and potentially supportive of very different kinds of social visions and political projects.”

formed, abstract, naturalistic or religious essence that effectuates itself consistently across all contexts — from his intuition (elaborated and deepened by later theorists) of the polysemy of communication and the relative indeterminacy and instability of meaning, and from his early understanding of the complexity and ambivalent texture of human consciousness in popular common sense. Thus, in contrast to the anti-empirical flavor (in caricature and otherwise) of some forms of cultural studies — particularly those grounded in poststructuralist or postmodernist sensibilities — neo-Gramscian perspectives are well-suited to the kind of sustained and concrete political and social analysis that can elucidate the role of mass media in the rise of the New Right over recent decades.

Following the wider availability in English of some of his major works, Gramsci's insights were revived in a new context by scholars associated with British Cultural Studies, especially in what has been called its “classical period” (Kellner 2002) between the early 1960s and mid-1980s. Foremost among these is Stuart Hall, who became the most prominent in a group of scholars concerned with building a kind of Marxist-rooted critical theory that was positioned to illuminate the social, political and economic changes occurring in the neoliberal era, especially the role of culture broadly — and mass media in particular — in processes of ideological domination and contestation.

Hall (1979 [1977], 1980a) elaborated a nuanced understanding of how people engage with cultural texts that powerfully encourage but can never fully guarantee the acceptance of dominant ideological understandings. He developed this “encoding-decoding” framework in part to enable scholars to escape what seemed to be an intractable divide between cultural studies theories that place essentially unlimited power in texts (e.g. news reports) — and the forces that produce them — to inculcate socially dominant meanings, on the one hand, and perspectives that ignore or marginalize larger political-economic processes and assume an

essentially unlimited audience independence and autonomy, in which people have boundless freedom to (re)interpret messages based on their own subjectivities, on the other.<sup>17</sup> As Hall (1980a: 134) put it:

Polysemy must not...be confused with pluralism...Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social and cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested.

Hall and colleagues at the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies began from a concern with the crystallization and circulation of ideological representations that support capitalist power relations, and creatively reformulated this agenda to draw out social agency and the possibilities for counter-hegemonic cultural struggle. One of their goals was to understand the audience as a culturally differentiated and active generator of textual interpretations grounded in particular, materially framed social locations, and in the individual identities and aspirations that derive complexly from these.<sup>18</sup> But at the same time, by foregrounding questions of power and acknowledging structural limits to cultural production and reception, scholars in this tradition seek to complicate naïve (and, perhaps, increasingly pervasive) notions of extreme audience autonomy. As Sut Jhally expressed it, "so the question, then, is this: given the possibility of infinite meanings, why is it that in concrete and specific circumstances only a few meanings are given?" (Jhally 2005)

Hall approached this question with a basic analytic framework that categorizes audience positions into those that construct "dominant" or "preferred" readings, those that produce "negotiated" readings, and those that impel "oppositional" or "resistant" readings. People who spin *dominant* readings (or "decodings") generally understand media texts according to the perspectives from which they are produced (or "encoded"), which

<sup>17</sup> For a critique of this tendency in contemporary cultural studies, which has been termed "cultural populism," see Turner (2003 [1990]: 187-89).

<sup>18</sup> Hall originally formulated the encoding-decoding framework for the analysis of televisual texts, but the categories are transferable to print news, and, possibly, other forms of media.

effectuates these texts' operation as legitimations of the existing order of power relations. An example here might be a white-collar middle manager watching an evening news story dominated by New Right voices and representations, and interpreting the impending labor strike it reports as the result of selfish demands by envious manual workers that threaten broad national prosperity and global competitiveness. Those who construct *negotiated* readings glean more contradiction and ambivalence from texts, but still construct their meaning within the basic limitations of dominant understandings. Often, these contradictions suggest limited challenges to existing power relations based on localized or narrowly class-based subjectivities, but fall short of fundamental opposition. An example might be an old-guard union worker in the same industry interpreting the impending strike as reported on the news from a narrowly economic or business-unionism perspective — i.e. as a legitimate move to protect employees' living standards — but nevertheless expressing an overall aversion to labor stoppages in general as a drag on the economy and a threat to innocent consumers, and accepting the inherent power of owners and managers to direct investment and production decisions. Those who spin *oppositional* readings react to media representations in a mode of fundamental challenge to dominant understandings, instead interpreting texts from the standpoint of an alternative or counter-hegemonic discourse. An example here might be a radical labor activist who — despite the conservative ideological flavor of most representations contained in the report — reacts to news of the strike with expressions of broad solidarity, and who interprets statements by company representatives, political elites and journalists as maneuvers to quash budding union militancy that has the potential to encourage a socialist transformation. Texts are encoded at the level of media production as the provisional outcome of a complex interplay of material, cultural, social and political factors that play out in specific institutional and organizational

contexts through professional norms and routines framed by structural tendencies in the political-economy of the news field. Tensions are present at all levels of the circuit, and domination and resistance are more or less evident throughout, but the pressures for major channels of mass communication to produce news that at least encourages dominant readings — and the power relations these readings support — are strong.

At the same time, it is important to emphasize that no aspect of a particular audience social position or identity can *guarantee* any kind of reading — preferred, negotiated or resistant. These are complex and contingent operations that are always open to slippage due to the multidimensionality that characterizes texts and the forces that produce them — thus often resulting in news reports with significant opposition discourse, and sometimes even counter-hegemonic representations — the complications of audience psychology and consciousness, and the particular processes through which people experience and understand their subjectivities. Thus, simply being a woman, or a small business owner, or a Republican, or an African-American with a master's degree, and so on, never mechanically determines one's response to a media text (see also Turner 2003 [1990]: 173-4). Nevertheless, social position — which is always at some level connected (though not reducible) to the structural-material conditions that obtain in a given historical context — is a powerful shaper of textual responses that orients (though doesn't guarantee) audience engagement with media. Thus, just as a Gramscian understanding of hegemony would indicate, Hall's encoding-decoding framework suggests a recursive ensemble of material and structural conditions, political and social institutions, and cultural-ideological tendencies, registered both at the level of media production and at the level of audience reception (and these levels themselves are connected in complex ways).

Dominant social forces accomplish the (positive) ideological work of building and solidifying hegemony in part by circulating media texts that capture culturally resonant aspects of popular common sense and reformulate these components in ways that legitimate their power, thus securing consent through the generation of preferred readings. As Hall (1988: 46) wrote in an analysis of Thatcherism:

The first thing to ask about an ‘organic ideology’ that, however unexpectedly, succeeds in organizing substantial sections of the masses and mobilizing them for political action, is not what is *false* about it but what about it is *true*. By ‘true’ I do not mean universally correct as a law of the universe but ‘makes good sense.’

Again, because hegemony is never all-encompassing, audiences can and do engage in negotiated and — to a lesser extent — oppositional readings as well. And of course, the specific contours of hegemonic and counter-hegemonic media discourse, and preferred, negotiated and resistant audience readings, is ultimately an empirical question that must be addressed with reference to particular historical conditions. However, in the context of systematically unequal and hierarchical social relations, the material and political forces that impinge on both media production at the structural, institutional and organizational levels, and on reception as it is framed by the social positions of audiences, generate strong tendencies toward dominant readings and toward negotiated readings of a very limited kind. This limiting and constraining dynamic manifests ideology’s negative dimension.

But how do these understandings of the ideological implications of media texts relate to social scientific accounts of news coverage and attitude formation? In other words, what links macro-social cultural representations to the specific ways in which popular political consent is shaped and registered in contemporary American public policy debates? I turn to these questions in the next section, where I connect neo-Gramscian conceptualizations of discursive power to the psychological mechanisms that channel public opinion in concrete political contexts.

## VI. Framing, Psychological Ambivalence and Common Sense: A Proposed Theoretical Synthesis

Gramsci's elaborations of hegemony and popular common sense, and Hall's extensions of these concepts in his work on the encoding and decoding of media artifacts, exhibit striking parallels to an influential social scientific understanding of individual-level processes of political cognition and expression. These connections, which appear not to have been explicitly traced by scholars from either the critical-cultural or empirical-scientific wings of mass communication research, center on the relationship of media content to attitudes and perceptions as expressed in opinion surveys. My conceptual understanding of news coverage and the cultivation of popular consent to the conservative policy turn in the United States is grounded in the synergy promised by this theoretical combination.

According to the psychological perspective on attitude expression best exemplified by John Zaller's "question-answering model," mass opinion is characterized neither by pure randomness and arbitrariness rooted in general ignorance and lack of political interest (see Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; Converse and Markus 1979), nor by strong "true attitudes" rooted in citizen rationality and competence, which can be accurately determined after peeling away layers of unsystematic measurement error. Instead, most people's understanding of political and social affairs is characterized by a large degree of *ambivalence*.<sup>19</sup> In other words, we tend to possess a range of often apparently conflicting — yet sincerely and genuinely held — "considerations" that might be relevant to political and public policy issues (Zaller 1992; Zaller and Feldman 1992).<sup>20</sup> These considerations cumulate over years of

<sup>19</sup> See Hochschild (1981) for rich empirical evidence of Americans' complex and ambivalent understandings concerning the interplay of social justice and economic freedom.

<sup>20</sup> "Consideration" in this sense refers essentially to any mental construct that could potentially be used by a survey respondent in forming an answer to a question (for my purposes, primarily questions about specific economic and social welfare policy items). Thus, considerations need not be confined to well-developed arguments based on evidence and logical reasoning processes. In fact, typically considerations are more likely to comprise fragments of factual (or incorrect)



socialization processes, including concrete experiences and engagement with mass and interpersonal communications of various kinds. When survey respondents encounter political and public policy questions, they draw on the considerations that are most salient for them at the time. Saliency requires in the first place that considerations be accessible in working memory, and both accessibility and salience in turn are strongly influenced by frequent and recent exposures in communicative processes that *prime* these considerations.

This understanding of message processing and political attitude expression has been linked to a theoretical framework in cognitive psychology called the “associative network model of memory.” (Taber 2003: 442-46) According to this perspective, we can represent relationships among concepts in the mind through a web-like structure, where nodes are linked by explicit and implicit associations of varying strength and emotional force that form through socialization and communications processes over time. For instance, the more often that people discuss or hear about “freedom” in association with “private property,” the more strongly these considerations become connected in their mental networks as members of particular conceptual clusters. So, when these people watch news reports containing rhetorical constructions of “freedom,” it becomes more likely that both “freedom” and “private property” will be made accessible and salient, and thus emerge as working resources for choosing answers to survey questions to which they seem relevant.<sup>21</sup> Thus, poll results are temporary constructions or moments of expression that — while usually grounded in plausible socio-political concepts or images, rather than being based on random or arbitrary factors — are nonetheless derived from the mix of considerations that are accessible and salient at the time.

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information, images and stereotypes, affectively colored objects and memories, assumptions about “how the world works” based on widely held cultural narratives, and general social beliefs and value claims about, for example, who is deserving of sympathy and assistance, who is normal and who is deviant etc.

<sup>21</sup> See also Lakoff (2011) for evidence from cognitive science suggesting that culturally resonant and politically consequential conceptual activations of this sort entail specific physical changes in the brain.

Moreover, considerations that are primed often — especially over long periods of time — become *chronically accessible*. In other words, they are almost always in the “top of the head” reservoir of mental constructs available for deployment in answering survey questions. For most members of the mass public, I suggest that chronically accessible (and salient) considerations are precisely those that are culturally resonant — i.e. they are considerations that constitute major discursive elements in the dominant “superstructure” of society, which, because it is “determined” (in the weaker sense of the term defined by my quotation of Stuart Hall in the previous section) by the material forces that constitute the political economy of mass media and other hegemonic sites, encourages preferred readings of news texts. In the vocabulary of social scientific approaches to communication, the words and images in mass media coverage *frame* political and social phenomena in ways that prime particular considerations. We can think of a frame as a conceptual and discursive package — manifest in sound, writing or visual images — that explicitly or implicitly highlights certain aspects of an issue and downplays or obscures others, thus suggesting particular constructions of social problems and particular actions to address them (Entman 2007).<sup>22</sup> Media framing-through-priming is one crucial pathway by which considerations become accessible and salient to audiences, and thus operative as criteria by which to answer poll questions probing support for public policies.

This perspective on news reception and attitude expression implies that people will likely have as accessible and salient whatever mix of considerations that is primed by the frames that typically appear in the kinds of media with which they regularly engage. Thus, the informational texture and discursive diversity of mass communications environments —

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<sup>22</sup> For the voluminous social scientific literature in political psychology and communication studies on framing and priming, see, e.g., McLeod et al 2002; Roskos-Ewoldsen et a. 2002; Kinder 2003; Chong 1993; Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b; Entman 1993, 2004, 2007.

which, while their specific manifestations are always ultimately an empirical question, nevertheless are powerfully influenced by the political-economic forces that impinge on news outlets as hegemonic institutions — constitute a major factor shaping how people respond to survey questions.

Certainly — and just as Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding framework implies — because the particular social locations of audience members (marked, for example, by economic class, race and ethnicity, gender, sexual identity, educational background and so on) generate different socialization, interpersonal communications and other experiential processes that impact the substance and range of considerations that people acquire, even the limiting hypothetical case of regular exposure to mass communications environments that uniformly present dominant ideological visions could never produce preferred readings across the board: As Jhally (2005) put it: “No one else has lived, or can live, by definition, precisely the life you’ve lived, I’ve lived, anyone has lived... The combination of discourses that surge through us as we try to make sense of the world is absolutely unique.” In addition, just as a neo-Gramscian perspective on media discourse would suggest, even mainstream commercial news — especially under the historical conditions of formally free expression that obtain in the United States — rarely circulates representations that are fully supportive of dominant social forces (Hall 1979 [1977]). And, of course, there are other communications media — specialized journals of public affairs, alternative Internet news sites, social movement publications — with which some people engage regularly and which may be conceptualized as counter-hegemonic venues that cultivate critical social orientations, in large part by priming oppositional sets of considerations. This means that audiences are never completely vulnerable to framing influence and that some resistance to

or repudiation of media messages — seen in negotiated and oppositional readings — is both theoretically possible and practically evident.

Moreover, while a degree of ambivalence at some level likely characterizes the thinking of even the most politically conscious and committed people, those who spend much time and energy attending to mass communications and discussing public affairs — including in some cases through exposure to media and venues of interpersonal exchange that challenge dominant understandings and power arrangements through counter-hegemonic operations — are more likely to organize their considerations consistently and coherently, hold to them confidently, and connect them directly to explicit visions of society, to particular policy issues, and to their own concrete experiences and material interests. Nonetheless, despite these real and significant limits to ideological control in the interests of dominant forces — or in Page and Shapiro’s (1992) words, “elite manipulation of public opinion” — the major point remains that people’s social understandings and political preferences are deeply reflective of the communicative contexts in which they are enmeshed. In the current historical situation, these contexts centrally include the hegemonic mass media and the ancillary institutions that surround it, such as the advertising complex that provides the bulk of its revenues, and the increasingly sophisticated public relations arms of state apparatuses, political parties, corporations and interest groups.

I want to suggest that we think of Zaller’s (1992) considerations as micro-psychological analogues to Gramsci and Hall’s elements of popular common sense. Like the components of common sense, considerations cumulate over time from various socialization, experiential and communicative processes localized in social venues such as the family, formal educational system, religious and voluntary organizations, workplaces, neighborhoods and mass media — which are simultaneously identified in neo-Gramscian

theory as concrete sites at which hegemony is constructed, fortified and challenged. Also like the elements of common sense, considerations are characterized by degrees of ambivalence, fragmentation and contradiction — particularly among the majority of the mass public in our historical context that has relatively few opportunities and relatively little inclination for developing factual political knowledge, or for engaging in the active, critical thought and consistent social practice, that can help elaborate and hone their understandings into more coherent frameworks for analyzing and acting in the world of public affairs.<sup>23</sup> And like hegemonic ideological operations, in which dominant social forces — working through institutions such as the news media — selectively evoke culturally resonant components of popular common sense in configurations that justify, promote and reinforce patterns of privilege and subordination, we can understand framing-through-priming as an individual-level mechanism by which mass communications messages psychologically activate certain clusters of considerations, which feed into polling responses that political elites deploy as legitimations of dominant power relations — and the public policies that support and further these arrangements. Thus, “mental equipment” (Larrain 1996: 61) — i.e. the psychological processes through which people perceive (or construct) the political and social world — plays an important part in ideological operations, although these dynamics are subtle, complex and never totally effective from the perspective of dominant interests. In sum, the processes by which media coverage shapes survey responses constitute one crucial instantiation of the dynamic through which dominant forces cultivate popular consent by circulating discourse — which we may categorize analytically into linguistic or visual frames — at a major hegemonic social site where common sense is constructed, (re)formulated and reinforced.

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<sup>23</sup> On the relationships connecting political and public policy knowledge, socio-economic status and political power in the contemporary United States, see Delli Carpini and Keeter (1997).

Stuart Hall's conceptual elaboration of social *articulation* also resonates strongly with the micro-psychological "question-answering" model of opinion expression. Articulation in the interplay of mass consciousness and culture refers to the processes by which particular discursive constructions of social relations become connected to: 1) other discursive-cultural formulations, 2) political movements, which in my context include policy proposals, 3) rooted social positions and identities (what social-scientific public opinion scholars might call "predispositions"), and 4) material or structural conditions (Hall 1985; Makus 1990). Crucially, these connections are not logically or historically necessary, but nor are they random or arbitrary. Rather, they are the product of social forces working to gain or solidify popular allegiance. Forging such links, thus, is contingent on particular historical conditions and political actions — including, I argue, mass media dynamics. These connections are always to some extent unstable, but in particular historical contexts they nevertheless can be quite durable and effective in constructing hegemonic conceptions that legitimize dominant power relations.<sup>24</sup>

Like the mental considerations about social life and public affairs posited by John Zaller and social scientific researchers inspired by him, the discursive elements (or bits of popular common sense) that are articulated in consciousness under Stuart Hall's framework are fragmentary ideas drawn from a variegated fount of ideological currents and internalized through socialization. As Hall (1985: 111) put it, "common sense thinking contains what

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<sup>24</sup> Like hegemony itself, articulation in Hall's formulation is a multi-dimensional concept, and not all senses of the term are directly relevant to my analytic framework on attitude expression.

At the level of macro-social discourse, articulation describes how dominant forces link different class and group interests under a certain hegemonic conception and political project. And then there is the critical scholar's conscious attempt to *rearticulate* discursive, social and material elements in ways that will further new understandings that carry emancipatory possibilities. As Hall (1985: 95) put it: "The aim of a theoretically informed political practice must surely be to bring about or construct the articulation between social or economic forces and those forms of politics and ideology which might lead them in practice to intervene in history in a progressive way — an articulation which has to be *constructed* through practice precisely because it is not guaranteed by how those forces are constituted in the first place." On this mode of "ideological struggle," see also Hall (1985: 112-13). Such active political intervention, which I engage in the section on epistemology at the end of this chapter and in Chapter 9, is central to my understanding of critical media analysis.

Gramsci called the traces of ideology, ‘without an inventory.’” In our historical circumstances, elite communications — circulated primarily through media outlets — connect (or articulate) certain concepts to each other, to policy issues, and to material conditions by encapsulating them in culturally resonant frames. As a result, mass communications prime particular sets of considerations in ways that forge connections in consciousness between them, and connections between considerations, material conditions (such as the state of the economy), social predispositions (marked — however imperfectly — by variables like income level and race), and public policies. Finally, in a formulation that evokes cognitive psychology’s associational network model of memory, Hall (1985: 104) contends that “ideologies do not operate through single ideas: they operate in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations. As you enter an ideological field and pick out any one nodal representation or idea, you immediately trigger off a whole chain of connotative associations.” Thus, in social scientific parlance, communicative frames that prime a certain consideration secondarily activate other considerations to which this idea is connected in audiences’ mental networks as a result of previous socialization processes, both mediated and experiential.

For example, a set of statements circulated on television news by Republican elites and Clinton administration officials under the frame of welfare dependency might link (or articulate) the concepts of paid private-sector employment, self-discipline and relative prosperity, on the one hand, as opposed to federal government social assistance, dependency, sloth and poverty, on the other (fragments of popular common sense), and further articulate these elements with welfare reform as a policy. Media messages prime these considerations (or elements of common sense) — which may also connote sub-articulations to conceptions of race and gender — for a middle-class viewer (social position or

predisposition), who is being compelled to work longer hours (material conditions), thus activating such connections when this viewer is asked whether he favors welfare reform. When certain sets of articulated and culturally resonant frames appear frequently in news media and are rarely challenged by alternative constructions, this process results in the articulation in audience consciousness of fragments of common sense that may spur politically significant effects on public opinion polls. Such polls are then deployed by political elites to signify consent for their preferred policies — and the power relations that underpin and are promoted by them.

As I suggested in Section V, the perspective on ideology that I draw from to conduct concrete media analysis allows me to steer clear of a simplistic and mechanistic reliance on notions of false consciousness that not only fail to recognize the constructive role of ideology, but depict people as irredeemable dupes who inherently lack the capacity to understand which policies will promote their interests and values. Hall's encoding-decoding categories — understood with reference to social scientific perspectives on the relationships between communication frames and the micro-processes by which media messages operate to activate considerations — acknowledge the relative interpretive and attitudinal autonomy of newspaper readers and TV audiences (rooted in the complexities of linguistic representation, human cognition and consciousness, and the material and social influences on these). Such perspectives on audience agency and critical potential, understood in relation to the relatively unstable character of hegemony at the level of macro-social discourse, also highlight opportunities and capacities for popular political struggle: people can and (to some extent) actually do challenge dominant readings of the news, and insurgent social movements and oppositional political actors can (in theory) present alternative visions that



are effective in harnessing aspects of common sense to emancipatory social practices and political projects that people will embrace.

But at the same time, the framework I offer recognizes the real — i.e. structurally and materially based — *limits* on the freedom to interpret communication artifacts independently and form “autonomous policy preferences.” Gramsci, Hall and others in this intellectual tradition recognize that the material structures of political economy impel news media to privilege dominant representations, so the ideological battles that occur on the terrain of the news — or “framing contests,” in the parlance of social scientific mass communications theory — are not “fair” in the pluralistic sense of the term: the limiting and distorting dimensions of ideological operations in mass media constitute a complementary dimension to the constructive and productive faces, stunting possibilities for deepening and extending human freedom and collective autonomy by systematically refracting the social world to the benefit of powerful interests.

Of course, in the state-civil society configuration that prevails in capitalist-democracies like the United States, direct government censorship in the realm of domestic policy discourse is very rare. Moreover, legal frameworks and cultural traditions have created a public sphere in the form of the news media that is — in theory — open to nearly anyone, along with liberty of association and formally free elections. This means that there are numerous potential opportunities for criticism, opposition and even counter-hegemonic resistance — social forces that to some degree challenge dominant understandings, policy directions and power arrangements are not forbidden from circulating discourse that will capture *other* elements of common sense (or reconfigure the same elements that dominant forces are activating), and articulate them to alternative political projects and visions of society. And popular constituencies can use their own concrete social and material

experiences to interpret these new discursive constructions in ways that challenge dominant forces, voicing opposition to policies that subvert their interests and values through public opinion polls, and mounting insurgent mobilizations that exert organized pressure on the state apparatus and powerful interests.<sup>25</sup>

In sum, hegemonic institutions such as mass media constitute sites at which contending social forces struggle to present discourse that can activate elements of common sense and articulate them to political visions comprising desired public policy directions and power arrangements. These ideological operations, I argue, work through the mechanisms of communications framing and priming, and their interaction at the individual level with the complex and ambivalent amalgam of mental considerations that make up the popular common sense that we acquire socially. However, dominant forces have a decided advantage in these struggles through structural constraints working at the level of news production (i.e. the broad political economy of media-government-corporate relations), and at the level of audience reception (through socioeconomically rooted disparities in political knowledge and patterns of consciousness).

This theoretical framework is well-positioned to fuel concrete analysis of such ideological dynamics as they have operated through mainstream news coverage, political discourse and public opinion in the rise of the New Right during the neoliberal era: its nuanced conceptualizations are remarkably consistent with current social scientific understandings of micro-level communications reception and attitude expression; its relational ontology and epistemology (which I explore more fully in Section VIII) is

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<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, such counter-hegemonic dynamics might result not only in immediate policy changes, but also in shifting political party alignments, the creation of new parties, and the election of candidates to public office who would begin to dismantle the political props for corporate power, militarism, racism, patriarchy and related oppressions, perhaps even challenging neoliberal capitalism itself. While various forms of resistance to the New Right and to neoliberalism generally have occurred around the world, sustained challenge on this scale has not emerged in the United States over the last 30 to 40 years.

amenable to multi-methods critical analysis at the level of culture and communication, and of material structures and conditions, while its conceptual focus foregrounds the normative questions of power that are too often sidelined in conventional academic treatments of the media; and its core substantive concerns — i.e. the political dynamics of class power under (and beyond) the social conditions of capitalism — provides the broad problematic for my empirical analyses. In the next section, I prepare the ground for these analyses by sketching the historical context of my study and elaborating some major policy directions and key discursive moves that have characterized the rise of the New Right during the neoliberal era.

### **VII. Neoliberalism in Historical Context and Political Practice: The American New Right from Carter’s Malaise to Reagan’s Revolution to Clinton’s Capitulation**

Neoliberalism as a political-economic framework for the operation of capitalism traces its immediate roots to the post-World War II period with the theories of scholars like the economist Milton Friedman and the political philosopher Friedrich von Hayek, now intellectual luminaries of the New Right. Its march into the centers of institutional power in the United States can be traced to the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the end of the post-war expansion led to a crisis of “stagflation” that opened space for an emerging bloc of governmental and business elites to offer a new political-economic and ideological-cultural framework. This broad understanding would facilitate social practices and public policies to ensure continued profits and viability for the capitalist political-economy through which the power of these elite interests was constituted. By the end of the 1970s, neoliberal doctrine — which was positioned to address developments such as intensifying competition from the resurgence of the previously war-ravaged economies of Europe and East Asia, new productivity-enhancing technologies, the worldwide run-up in energy prices, and deindustrialization facilitated by liberalized global trade arrangements, which marked the end

of the Fordist era of mass industrial production and elevated finance capital to pre-eminence in the United States — would replace the Keynesian-liberal approach that was dominant in national policymaking circles since the New Deal (Harvey 2005). And by the mid-1990s, the basic economic and social welfare policy rationales of neoliberalism — and its core discursive assumptions and parameters — would be firmly entrenched as the mainstream elite analysis, favored in modified form even by the power centers of the national Democratic Party, as represented in the Clinton administration (Meeropol 1998).

As the great post-World War II boom wound down at the beginning of the 1970s, the American economy entered a prolonged period of low growth rates, high unemployment, stagnating real incomes and wages, rising inflation, and falling corporate profit rates (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005). The policy tools usually employed to reverse these trends appeared not to be working: for example, mainstream economists until the 1970s thought that steeply increasing inflation and unemployment could not occur simultaneously, and that the fiscal and monetary policy approaches to curbing one rate would typically lead to increasing the other. For a variety of reasons related to changing global economic conditions, this “demand-management” approach relying on interest rate adjustments and tax and spending policies proved unable to break the hold of stagflation and the apparent political “malaise” that accompanied it.<sup>26</sup> Into the breach stepped a cadre of scholars espousing neoliberal tenets, including a small but soon to be influential set of economists touting “supply-side” fiscal theory.

These experts advocated steps that promised to dramatically scale back the role of the state in market activity, allowing for a more efficient allocation and productive

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<sup>26</sup> President Jimmy Carter in 1979 famously inventoried the country’s seemingly intractable brew of economic, social and cultural problems — and prominently attacked material self-centeredness and empty consumerism — in a national address that has subsequently come to be known as the “malaise” speech, after the label affixed to it by White House pollster Patrick Caddell.

deployment of national resources. In terms of fiscal policy, this meant large tax cuts designed to spur savings, entrepreneurship and investment, and the severe reduction or elimination of government programs (particularly at the federal level) — with the key exception of military and domestic security expenditures. Particular targets for cutbacks were redistributive programs in health care, housing, social insurance and income assistance; public goods provision such as mass transit and subsidized jobs initiatives; and programs to regulate business activity in finance, labor relations, wages, worker health and safety, environmental quality, consumer rights, and telecommunications. Unions — as the major working class political institution in the post-World War II era — have been a key casualty of neoliberal federal policy overhauls, which have often been justified in the culturally resonant language of business “flexibility.” Pro-corporate statutes, regulatory enactments or non-enforcement of existing protections, and administrative tools have all decreased the power of labor by making it more costly to stage strikes and more difficult to organize new workplaces.<sup>27</sup>

Overall, the neoliberal rationale for these moves is that most government spending and regulation — with the exception of areas deemed to help markets operate effectively, such as military power and domestic law enforcement — was a drag on the economy, reducing incentives for (and raising the costs of) productive, private, profit-oriented activity (Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005; Baker 2007). Military expenditures — while constituting a site of some political tension and contradiction from the standpoint of the neoliberal-New Right’s avowed anti-statist convictions — were central to the conservative domestic project, especially during the Reagan years and during the George W. Bush administration. Such spending was a major factor spurring economic growth during the mid- to late-1980s,

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<sup>27</sup> I discuss the Reagan administration’s watershed firing of striking federal air-traffic controllers in Chapter 5. The president rhetorically ratcheted up his response to the PATCO union during a press conference at the signing ceremony for his 1981 tax plan.

growth that was typically attributed in popular forums to cutbacks in domestic social spending, regulation and — especially — taxes.<sup>28</sup> In the domain of tax policy, the idea was to harness the innate human desire for a rising material standard of living in order to promote private-sector work and savings by the labor force, and productive capital investments by businesses. This was to be achieved largely through heavy “across-the-board” (or flat-rate) income tax cuts, reduction of capital gains taxes, and incentives for firms to invest in new physical infrastructure and technologies. Ultimately, according to supply-side theorists, these tax cuts would not only spur job creation and retention while simultaneously boosting productivity and curbing inflation, but would increase government revenues and melt away the federal budget deficit, in spite of increased military and security expenditures (Greider 1982; Phillips 1990; Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005; Baker 2007).

Ronald Reagan’s tax and budget plan of 1981, which is one of two empirical cases I examine, was the major initial offensive in this policy turn founded on neoliberal ideas. Other key episodes included a number of moves since the late 1970s designed to ease business regulation through statute, administrative appointments and agency rule changes; the uneven but significant scaling back of income assistance, social insurance and health care programs during the 1980s; the bipartisan austerity budget and tax blueprint that resolved the partial government shutdowns of the mid-1990s; the massive welfare overhaul of 1996 (my second policy case), which ended the federal guarantee of cash assistance for poor single mothers and placed new restrictions on benefits enforced by punitive sanctions; the various pro-business trade policy initiatives of the late 1990s and early 2000s (most prominently, the North American Free Trade Agreement and the construction of the World Trade Organization); the George W. Bush administration tax plans of 2001 and 2003, and the (so-

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<sup>28</sup> For a popular neoliberal defense of 1980s fiscal and economic policies written by the editor of *The Wall Street Journal*, see Bartley (1992).

far) stalled initiative to partially privatize Social Security, launched by the Bush administration in 2005. While the neoliberal turn in domestic economic and social welfare policy was not fully effective — for example, right-wing forces faced substantial resistance on some issues from liberal Democratic members of Congress during the 1980s and the Clinton administration during the 1990s — the cumulative effect has been to sharply redistribute before- and after-tax income upward, to arrest the steady drop in poverty rates that had occurred until the 1970s, and to exacerbate wealth and income inequality to levels not seen since the 1920s (Phillips 1990; Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005; Baker 2007; Morgan 2007).

We can understand the development of neoliberal policy as a project to restore class power — both in the formal state apparatus and explicitly political sectors, and in the workplace and civil society — after a long period during which the structure of the post-World War II political economy made more broadly shared prosperity, and basic social rights and protections, acceptable to most major business interests and governing elites. The pre-eminence of the United States in the global economy and financial structure — combined with demand-management policies at home and the post-war bargain or “truce” between corporate capital and bureaucratized labor (Davis 2007 [1986]: Ch. 2; Moody 1988: Ch. 2-3) — created a situation in which rising real wages and rising business profit rates co-existed (although the latter increased faster than the former), and recessions were short and shallow (Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005). Beginning in the late 1960s and early 1970s, these conditions steadily dissipated, and space emerged for a new political project that would address the changed structural circumstances and re-energize corporate dominance, while securing a level of mass allegiance. Neoliberalism, I argue, found a potent political and cultural vehicle in the New Right.

The roots of the American New Right can be traced to the various anti-communist, nativist and conservative-traditionalist groups — many touting conspiracist narratives — that flourished on the margins of national politics during the early and middle Cold War period (Kazin 1995; Diamond 1995; Berlet and Lyons 2000). Its march from the fringes of legitimacy and power to the centers of governance and national policymaking involved patient political organizing, intellectual production, cultural struggle and financial mobilization. Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater, who lost the 1964 election to Democratic President Lyndon Johnson in a landslide, was the first major-party candidate who might be considered a proto-representative of the New Right. At the time, Goldwater's ultra-conservative cast was a decidedly minority profile in the national Republican Party. But over the next 15 years, the economic, political and cultural landscape changed sufficiently such that Reagan could not only win the GOP primary as the clear candidate of the right, but could capture the presidency in a last-minute, come-from-behind electoral vote landslide, offering an optimistic vision of nationalist renewal, market entrepreneurialism and traditional American values that contrasted sharply with Carter's apparent pessimism and calls for self-sacrifice. The former Hollywood actor and California governor's victory inaugurated an era during which the basic ideas that undergird neoliberalism have gained force and currency, even through intermittent periods of Democratic congressional and presidential control (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Block et al. 1987; Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005): the gravitational center for national policy and political discourse has shifted, as conservative forces consolidated their (provisional) victory in the Gramscian war of position.

A key factor in the synergy of neoliberal economic doctrine and conservative politics in the United States more generally centered on the combination of radically pro-market ideas favorable to corporate elites and the new breed of economists and policy experts, on



the one hand, with a kind of right-leaning populist discourse holding strong and racially charged roots in the Deep South, on the other. To build a coalition of middle- and working-class voters and political activists who could recognize their interests and values as being advanced by the neoliberal agenda required an appeal to — and a powerful re-articulation of — elements of American popular common sense that construct federal politicians and bureaucrats (and their cosmopolitan, urban-based enablers in the academic, media and nonprofit “special interest group” establishment) as the major obstacles to freedom and prosperity for ordinary “middle Americans.”<sup>29</sup> Even in its left-leaning incarnation of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, populism harbored currents of nativism, religious exclusion, cultural authoritarianism and outright racism; these threads became stronger and more virulent as the nemesis was slowly transfigured from greedy bankers and industrial magnates to liberal Washington politicians and bureaucrats (and their intellectual legitimizers), and as the civil rights movement provoked a white supremacist backlash in the former Confederate states (Kazin 1995: Ch. 9).

However, while groups that espouse egregiously racist, anti-immigrant and associated conspiratorial worldviews have continued to play important roles as sources of energy in the broader New Right movement (Berlet and Lyons 2000), a crucial factor in the rise of this political configuration to institutional power has been the rhetorical downplaying of such ascriptively anti-egalitarian perspectives, which by the 1970s and 1980s had become increasingly unacceptable in mainstream political discourse in the wake of the so-called “rights-revolution” (Kazin 1995; Berlet and Lyons 2000). These appeals were replaced by ostensibly color-blind rhetorics articulating what were expressed as traditional American

<sup>29</sup> This amorphous term, a favorite of New Right authors, appears to connote farmers, manual laborers, small business owners and employees, small-town residents in general, and even people who live in the geographic area between the (urbanized, cosmopolitan, left-leaning) East and West Coasts. As Ehrenreich (1987: 170, n. 3) remarks, the label “is itself ideologically interesting, in that it unites the blue collar auto worker and the wealthy car dealer, the security guard and the bank manager.”

values of market individualism against collectivist oppression by the federal government and allied social institutions, especially nonprofit organizations, charitable foundations and labor unions. Much of this discourse had an implicit, coded racial undertone (Edsall and Edsall 1991; Quadagno 1994; Fording 2003), but the virulent anti-egalitarianism of earlier elements of right-wing populism was obscured or rejected by the rising generation of movement leaders in the early 1970s.

Key to the New Right's hegemonic discourse has been the articulation of "freedom," "liberty" and "choice" with the competitive behavior of atomized individuals — as well as, by extension, nuclear families and business firms — in private market transactions.<sup>30</sup> Such connections have always been salient in American political culture and popular common sense, but the rising right-wing forces of the 1970s and 1980s managed to solidify these links in ways that have generated significant (though by no means monolithic) patterns of public consent for their favored economic and social welfare policy regimes. This has been accomplished by yoking these neoliberal conceptions to culturally resonant currents of populism, and channeling grassroots economic and social frustration against government social provision and economic regulation. In this narrative, New Right leaders — inside and outside state apparatuses — have constructed themselves as rebels, dissidents, even "revolutionaries" (often with roots among the working or lower-middle classes, or small entrepreneurial strata), champions of the common, patriotic (implicitly white) citizen of "middle America," out to restore government to its proper role. These invocations have persisted even as the conservative wing of the Republican Party has had partial or full

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<sup>30</sup> As UK Prime Minister (and Reagan confidante) Margaret Thatcher put it, there is "no such thing as society, only individual men and women" — and, she subsequently added, their families. All forms of social solidarity were to be dissolved in favour of individualism, private property, personal responsibility, and family values." (Harvey 2005: 23)

control of the national executive or legislative branches for most of the last 30 years, including a pair of two-term presidencies held by clear representatives of the New Right.<sup>31</sup> This discourse has radically separated the private economy from the state apparatus (or, what Gramsci terms “political society”), constructing a binary, zero-sum logic in which more authority and resources for one element simply equates to less for the other.<sup>32</sup> Ideologically, the effect has been to further de-politicize the economy and aspects of civil society and subject them to market imperatives by targeting the agents and mechanisms of (especially federal) government social provision, business regulation and labor organization. In this way, mass political, economic and cultural grievances have been rechanneled onto national politicians, judges and bureaucrats; their allies in academia, media, unions and non-profit advocacy organizations; and the “unproductive” social constituencies that benefit from these forces. As I discuss in my case study of welfare reform discourse in Chapter 7, the effect of this discursive separation has been to obscure a new material recombination of state and economy as neoliberal norms and practices have colonized government policy and administration, and as business representatives have played increasingly direct roles in the political and administrative process (Phillips 1990; Frank 2008). As Harvey (2005: 77-8) writes, “the boundary between the state and corporate power has become more and more porous.”<sup>33</sup>

<sup>31</sup> References to “revolution” are rife in New Right cultural material, most prominently in the frequent invocations of the “Reagan revolution” of 1980 and the “Republican Revolution” of 1994, as well as the local “tax revolts” that began with California’s Proposition 13 in 1978 (Frank 2008). On the discursive implications of the latter episode, Kazin (1995: 263) remarked, “the image of their movement as a populist insurgency rapidly passed into conventional wisdom — along with the language its organizers had used to describe themselves.”

See also the biography of George W. Bush, titled *Rebel in Chief*, in which the president was said to “operate in Washington like the head of a small occupying army of insurgents... He’s an alien in the realm of the governing class, given a green card by the voters.” (Frank 2008: 48)

<sup>32</sup> This ideological separation of the state (or politics and civic life) from the market — and the simultaneous construction of the economic system as apolitical — is fundamental to capitalism (see, e.g., Rupert 2005: 484-5; Swanson 2008). I argue, however, that neoliberalism as propagated through the New Right has intensified the dynamic, signifying this naturalization of the market through culturally evocative rhetorical representations that are advancing class power in forceful ways.

<sup>33</sup> Among many examples, this can be seen in the successive federal administrative reform efforts since 1980 that have focused on “cutting red tape,” reducing the public workforce, contracting out services (even including, increasingly, security

Thus, as an ascendant force in institutional politics, the New Right has blended pro-business tenets that were always in favor among key social bases of American conservatism — particularly since the rise of large corporations after the Civil War — with a grassroots, right-leaning populist rhetoric exalting the aggrieved (and implicitly white) small farmer, merchant and manual worker, stripped of much of its directly racist cast. In effect, the New Right re-articulated the discursive lines of populist antagonism from enmity against exploitative bankers, railroad magnates, industrialists and corrupt, pro-corporate politicians, to anger at parasitic, center-left federal politicians and judges, bureaucrats, intellectuals and lower-status clients.<sup>34</sup> Notions of class have been redrawn in a way that blurs or erases the lines of social status and political power that capitalist markets inscribe by virtue of people's role in economic production and the related stratified allocation of material privilege in the forms of income and wealth.

Instead, New Right voices have constructed a narrative whereby government officials themselves — and associated left-leaning interests — are cast as a “class” that exploits and oppresses competitive market actors generally in the interests of a collectivist project that ultimately serves “unproductive” and “undeserving” social elements (including, implicitly at least, racial minorities and immigrants).<sup>35</sup> This populist texture denies the crucial

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and military operations), and outright privatization. In a signal of the force of the new conservative hegemony, the “reinventing government” initiative spearheaded by Democratic Vice President Al Gore was suffused with neoliberal rhetoric and practices, as exemplified in the concept of “entrepreneurial government,” which constructs citizens (and businesses) as “customers.” (Levine 2004 [1978], Caiden 2004 [1981], Hood 2004 [1991], Osborne and Gaebler 1992, National Performance Review 2004 [1993])

<sup>34</sup> As Kazin (1995: 261) wrote of the 40<sup>th</sup> president's propensity to invite comparisons to Franklin D. Roosevelt: “Reagan was fond of quoting the Democratic icon to signify that he, too, was engaged in transforming a hapless government that no longer served average citizens... Observes the biographer Lou Cannon:... ‘He undermined the New Deal in its own vernacular.’”

<sup>35</sup> Thus, the so-called “new class” (Block et al. 1987; Kazin 1995) was seen as using state power to place obstacles in the way of the natural, competitive flourishing of (inherently unequal) talents, virtues and capacities in the (again, natural, even divinely ordained) private market. As Harvey (2005: 65-6) wrote of the philosophical logic of neoliberalism: “Individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings (such as not investing sufficiently in one's own human capital through education), rather than being attributed to any systemic property (such as the class exclusions usually attributed to capitalism).” This discourse draws heavily on the anti-elite ethic of “producerism” that has long played a key role in American right-wing populism (Berlet and Lyons 2000). In Chapter 5, I analyze Reaganite political rhetoric with reference to the producerist narrative.

role of popular social forces — such as the labor movement of 1930s and the civil rights movement — in *building* major aspects of the American social welfare and business regulatory state (Ehrenreich 1987; Piven and Cloward 1977; McAdam 1999 [1982]; Morone 2003). Neoliberal-New Right forces seek to undo these social achievements in the name of entrepreneurial freedom and market efficiency precisely by framing them as *elite* schemes that harm ordinary workers. In doing so, their discourse draws on longstanding threads of American common sense suspicious of state power — particularly “interference” in the economic realm (Hartz 1983 [1955]) — that had been significantly (though incompletely and unevenly) neutralized or de-emphasized during the post-New Deal era. It has transcribed this configuration of ideas in a powerful populist rhetoric, while simultaneously stressing a market fundamentalism drawn from neoliberal theory.<sup>36</sup>

Another set of crucial ingredients in the discursive reconfiguration that operated to channel neoliberalism through conservative institutional politics was a powerful cultural appeal to moral traditionalism and patriarchy, increasingly represented in specifically Christian rhetoric. Beginning in the 1970s, a group of newly politically conscious conservative evangelical and fundamentalist church organizations mobilized against what they saw as American society’s descent into sexual license and spiritual degradation. Allied with a resurgent segment of traditionalist Catholicism especially energized by the Supreme

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For a perceptive discussion of the New Right’s designation of this “new class,” see Ehrenreich (1987: 165-70). Ironically, the term “new class” was appropriated from a critique of Stalinism that had been mounted by independent socialists (Kazin 1995: 349, n. 22).

<sup>36</sup> Such a blend of market-libertarian tenets and right-leaning populist rhetoric may be viewed as a response to the contradictions in theory — and, especially, in practice — of neoliberalism as an ideological-political project (Harvey 2005). This can be seen in its suspicion of democracy and popularly representative institutions, its endorsement of expert-based politics and top-down governing arrangements, and its clear willingness to deploy government power on behalf of business interests, despite its glorification of “free” enterprise and unfettered competition (*ibid*: 66-7, 69-70). These contradictions have created instabilities and pockets of resistance in certain areas of public policy, with important implications for the role of the state under neoliberal control (Harvey 2005: 64-86).

New Right charges of “liberal elitism” are thrown into striking relief by Nixon Vice President Spiro Agnew’s statement that he didn’t think “there’s any particular gain to be made by debating on streetcorners... You don’t learn from people suffering from poverty, but from experts who have studied the problem.” (Ehrenreich 1987: 173, citing Witcover [1972: 265])

Court's 1973 endorsement of abortion rights — and even some elements of conservative and orthodox Judaism — these forces undertook a series of widespread, coordinated campaigns of civic organizing, political fund-raising and cultural advocacy (Ehrenreich 1987; Kazin 1995: 255-60; Morone 2003: Ch. 15; Harvey 2005: 49-50). While there are potential contradictions between this Judeo-Christian moral communitarianism and the neoliberal market individualism propagated by newly energized business interests,<sup>37</sup> the New Right has succeeded in articulating certain key connections among these elements, thus constructing a culturally resonant and internally coherent narrative linking economic “freedom” with personal “morality” — and even moral authoritarianism, as some segments have endorsed the aggressive use of state power to promote orthodox values and stigmatize or criminalize cultural deviance. This has involved the forging and reinforcement of (often, implicitly color-coded) connections in popular common sense among economic self-reliance, personal discipline and denial of physical gratification, conventional gender roles, and just material reward (so long as that reward does not include or encourage behavior deemed immoral).<sup>38</sup>

Finally, while not figuring prominently or directly in the news coverage and political discourse on economic and social welfare policy I explore in this study, the role of militaristic nationalism and aggressive foreign policy should not be understated in the ascendancy of neoliberalism through the rise of the New Right. Particularly during the Reagan administration, strong articulations of American market-capitalist liberty with populist moral traditionalist values — as against the totalitarianism of “godless Communism” (and, as the era progressed, militant Islamist terrorism) — were constructed

<sup>37</sup> See Ehrenreich (1987: 183-89) for a discussion of some of these tensions in the context of capitalist consumer culture.

<sup>38</sup> On the connection within the New Right framework between “the new class” and social “permissiveness” (especially among the poor), see Ehrenreich (1987: 176-8). These particular dynamics were most prominent in the context of my study during debate over the 1995-1996 welfare reform law, presented in Chapters 6 and 7.

For discussion of the theological sources and political implications of the several strands of conservative Christianity that have united in social activism under the New Right, see Berlet and Lyons (2000: 205-13).

and solidified.<sup>39</sup> Such discursive threads were manifested in economic and social welfare policy discourse by positioning this traditionalist, patriotic vision of “the people” in opposition to left-leaning elites who favor rapprochement with international communism, impose costly modernist socioeconomic engineering, and seek a breakdown of moral order under the purported influence of the 1960s New Left and counterculture.<sup>40</sup>

Neoliberalism’s discursive and practical manifestation in the vehicle of the American New Right was made possible by a multifaceted and aggressive political remobilization of corporate interests beginning in the early 1970s. These efforts fueled a growing assortment of think tanks, media organizations, electoral mobilization apparatuses and advocacy groups that have made major interventions through political fund-raising, organizing and cultural production (Zinn 1980: 546-49; Kazin 1995: Ch. 10; Berlet and Lyons 2000: 218-220; Lapham 2004; Harvey 2005: 43-4; Frank 2008). Especially important was the effort by business interests to pool resources and converge on broad policy agendas to serve a set of common goals centered on attacking the social welfare and business regulatory state and undermining the power of organized labor both in the workplace and in the formal political arena. These forces were much less closely networked and effectively organized during the New Deal-post-World War II-Great Society period: in that political-economic climate, business tended to pursue more particularistic goals along regional, firm or sector lines, and was unable or unwilling to mount a concerted push for fundamental changes that would recharge class power. But now, encountering new structural conditions, facing an increasingly weak political foe in the national Democratic Party and its allies, and chafing

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<sup>39</sup> For a revealing and carefully documented account of the cultural, political and economic links between key U.S. New Right groups and right-wing authoritarian regimes and guerilla movements in Africa and Latin America during the 1980s, see Frank (2008: Ch. 3 and 4).

<sup>40</sup> These connections are apparent during the signing ceremony for the Reagan tax plan (which I analyze in Chapter 5), when TV audiences heard the president rhetorically attacking the Soviet Union even as footage of the event signified key elements of right-wing producerism as articulated with conservative economic policy.

under mounting taxes and regulations in environmental quality, worker rights and consumer protections, corporate interests were, as one writer put it, “learning to spend like a class.”

(Harvey 2005: 44)<sup>41</sup>

Neoliberalism’s marriage — partly of principle, partly of convenience — with right-leaning American populism in recent decades has helped to create discursive and material conditions for the emergence of a highly effective hegemony in mainstream news coverage and mass consciousness. In the absence of a powerful re-articulation by opposition social forces, the normalization of these constructions has smoothed enactment and entrenchment of key elements of the neoliberal economic and social welfare policy regime. As Hall (1988) argues in his analysis of the ascendant conservative hegemony in the UK that operated in parallel with the American New Right,<sup>42</sup> Thatcherism was a powerful *cultural* force that demanded to be reckoned with (and resisted) on that plane. In other words — and contrary to the views of much of the British institutional and intellectual left at the time — the

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<sup>41</sup> See, for example, the 1971 memo to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce from Lewis Powell, who was soon to be nominated by President Richard Nixon to the Supreme Court; as Powell put it, “the time has come — indeed it is long overdue — for the wisdom, ingenuity and resources of American business to be marshaled against those who would destroy it. . . . The National Chamber of Commerce, he argued, should lead an assault upon the major institutions — universities, schools, the media, publishing, the courts — in order to change how individuals think ‘about the corporation, the law, culture, and the individual.’” From 1972 to 1982, chamber membership grew more than fourfold, to over 250,000 firms. (Harvey 2005: 43) For an example of this broad re-mobilization of business interests during the Reagan era, see the May 12, 1981, Associated Press story reporting that the American Bankers Association had broken a long policy of “political neutrality” — i.e. only commenting on and lobbying for policies with direct relevance to the banking sector — to explicitly endorse the administration’s tax plan, domestic budget cuts and efforts to curb industry regulations.

<sup>42</sup> While many of the social conditions and political configurations that gave rise to the New Right in the UK and the United States differed because of the historically specific trajectories of the two nations (Harvey 2005: 55-63), the general impetus of both movements was similar: to fuel a resurgence of business class power by yoking it to a right-wing populist-traditionalist appeal rooted in visions of national rebirth, laced with explicit or implicit racism and xenophobia, militarism, punitive constructions of criminal justice, social conformism and cultural authoritarianism glorifying the patriarchal family. In the realm of economic and social welfare policy, the drive in both cases was toward regressive tax reduction, state benefits retrenchment, attacks on union solidarity, the lifting of corporate regulations, privatization, “entrepreneurial governance,” and trade and international investment arrangements friendly to transnational capital (Hall 1988; Clarke 1991; Larrain 1996: 65-69). The similarities between the Thatcherite and Reaganite projects were no accident, because these visions and their associated policy programs were enframened (or “determined,” in the weaker sense of the word) by changing global economic forces that induced a crisis of capitalism.

Such strong links are evident in an Associated Press story reporting on Thatcher’s first state visit to the White House in February 1981, in which the UK leader “applaud(ed) Reagan’s ‘massive’ election victory and his program to cut federal spending and income taxes;” assailed “the growing involvement of the government in the economy and people’s lives;” and expressed optimism for Reagan’s policy success. White House Press Secretary James S. Brady said the personal connection between the two heads of government— who were said to share “lavish dinners” while discussing foreign and domestic affairs — made it “difficult to pry them away from each other at the end. Their chemistry is right. . . . They hit it off.”



conservative resurgence had to be challenged not only on the level of institutional electoral strategy and policy contestation narrowly conceived, but also on the level of ideas and understandings of the world that connect people's everyday experiences to larger social and political visions. In other words, the rhetoric and imagery presented by the new breed of Thatcherite elites — and amplified, though not without contradiction and contestation, in media discourse — resonated with culturally powerful components of ordinary Britons' common sense.<sup>43</sup> Conservative forces presented a vision of political, economic, social and cultural relations that appealed to large segments of the UK mass public because it evoked, and creatively recombined, key fragments of popular common sense. In contrast, Hall argued, left leaders lacked the imagination, capacity or inclination to forcefully counter the right in the struggle over ideas with culturally powerful visions that could resonate with other components of British common sense. Thatcherite discourse offered people an interlocked set of culturally plausible and materially effective resources for understanding the world and acting politically in the new historical context of neoliberalism, thereby affirming the value of key aspects of their identities and social lives.

A similar set of dynamics occurred in the interplay of mainstream news discourse, mass consciousness, and economic and social welfare policy opinion during the rise of the American New Right: the Reagan administration and its allies linked their regressive tax agenda to culturally powerful elements of popular common sense such as “freedom” from government “interference,” individual economic initiative and consumer “choice,” while bipartisan advocates of welfare reform tied their goals to “personal responsibility” and the end of pathological social “dependence” that breeds crime and disorder. These pervasive representations at the same time operated to address material needs and aspirations for

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<sup>43</sup> As Hall (1988: 167) wrote, “what Thatcherism as an ideology does, is to address the fears, the anxieties, the lost identities, of a people. It invites us to think about politics in images. It is addressed to our collective fantasies.”

significant segments of the population, through promises of increased job opportunities, larger paychecks and reduced government deficits (and thus, reduced future tax obligations) in the first case, and tax savings, reduced deficits (again) and physical security in the second episode. When frames drawing such connections circulated through mass media frequently — with little opposition from left-of-center political elites and nongovernmental voices — they operated to prime fragments of common sense (or “considerations,” in John Zaller’s terminology) in particular configurations that generated politically effective rationales for the right turn in economic and social welfare policy. Moreover, I argue, the domination of news coverage by official voices in general — and by depictions of politics as an elite-level game — operated through these same psychological mechanisms to disconnect public affairs and policymaking from the fabric of people’s everyday lives, possibly encouraging the sort of popular political cynicism and passivity that neoliberalism prefers.

Scholars have long noted what appears to be most Americans’ simultaneous “philosophical conservatism” and “operational liberalism” when it comes to economic and social welfare policy in the contemporary historical context. Consistent polling majorities express abstract opposition to “big government,” decry state interference in the economic realm, claim that the government “wastes a lot” of tax money, and generally favor private enterprise over state action (Feldman and Zaller 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009). And in recent decades people are much more likely to label their general ideological views as “conservative” than “liberal.”<sup>44</sup> At the same time, when survey items are worded as pragmatic questions of general policy, majorities or substantial pluralities have long expressed durable support for a number of key social welfare and business regulatory

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<sup>44</sup> According to a recent academic survey, more than 70 percent of Americans believe that “our freedom depends on the free enterprise system.” These ideas connect to the widespread belief in the American dream of upward economic mobility: more than three out of four people — including majorities of nonwhites, more than 70 percent of low-income Americans and more than half of unskilled white workers — believe that “it’s still possible to start out poor in this country, work hard and become rich.” (Page and Jacobs 2009: 51-2)

programs, including Social Security, Medicare, job-training, public education and a higher minimum wage. In addition, more people say they want to increase the tax responsibilities of corporations and the wealthy than want to decrease them, and mass support for the general principle of progressive taxation is strong, nearing 50 percent even among self-identified Republicans and high-income people (Page and Shapiro 1992: Ch. 4; Cook and Barrett 1992; Page and Jacobs 2009).<sup>45</sup> Majorities even express strong support for increased spending on programs to help poor people — when the word “welfare” is not used in the question (Gilens 1999). However, during major debates about *specific* public policy initiatives, polling majorities over the last 30 years have usually — although not in all cases — expressed ultimate support for the more conservative position (i.e. the course advocated aggressively by the neoliberal-New Right): majorities favored Reagan’s tax and budget agenda, supported welfare reform, opposed the Clinton health care plan, and endorsed the Bush tax cuts of 2001 and 2003.<sup>46</sup> Thus, in the bounded contexts of concrete episodes of institutional policy debate — characterized by widespread mainstream news coverage and elite communications campaigns — a picture of strong popular consent for the neoliberal turn in economic and social welfare policy emerges.

The complexities and ambiguities apparent in this basic three-level structure of American mass opinion can be illuminated by the Gramscian-Zallerian conceptual framework I elaborate here. Americans’ “philosophical conservatism” may be a durable residue of hegemonic socialization into general anti-state, pro-market orientations that, while a long-running feature of U.S. political culture and popular consciousness, have grown in

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<sup>45</sup> Incredibly, a 2007 survey shows 56 percent support for the notion that “our government should redistribute wealth by heavy taxes on the rich;” this result — which came despite a prompt informing respondents that the idea was controversial — appears to be an all-time high for the question, and came even before the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession (Page and Jacobs 2009: 85).

<sup>46</sup> The notable exception to this trend was the Bush administration’s proposal to begin privatizing Social Security, which never garnered majority polling support. I speculate on possible explanations for this anomaly in the conclusion to my study in Chapter 9.

salience during the neoliberal era: when people encounter these kinds of survey items, the larger number of them express support for the conservative position because the generalized language of the questions primes culturally powerful considerations in popular common sense. On the other hand, people’s substantial support for generally framed *policy directions* encompassing key aspects of the social welfare and business regulatory state may be anchored in patterns of socialization constituted by more direct experiences with these programs, flowing from concrete social predispositions: receiving a Social Security check — or being close to someone who does — having one’s basic medical services covered by the government after the age of 65, not having to pay tuition to send one’s children to school through 12<sup>th</sup> grade (and funding these programs through a tax system weighted toward those with the most ability to pay) are closely connected to most Americans’ everyday experiences, and have relatively transparent and direct implications for their material well-being. These attitudes, cultivated by the former New Deal-Great Society hegemony that expanded and solidified the social welfare and business regulatory state, result from articulations of common sense sedimented through concrete experiences in social venues like the family and the school system.

However, because most people do not pay close and frequent attention to national political affairs and public policy debates, the onset of highly charged episodes characterized by widespread news coverage and heavily circulated political discourse creates conditions under which opinions about specific policies expressed in polls can be especially open to mass communications influence. In a number of cases during the neoliberal era, New Right forces have successfully articulated a social vision that strengthens and connects key “philosophically conservative” strands of popular common sense to *a particular political project* that includes *specific public policies* — and to people’s concrete material experiences. In a

manifestation of ideology's positive register, most words and images that citizens encountered on commercial television news and in mass-market papers — whose producers, anchors, editors, reporters and sources are key examples in our historical context of what Gramsci called “intellectuals” — portrayed these policy issues in ways that resonated with key popular social and economic aspirations, while crystallizing and activating culturally resonant components of common sense.

At the same time, the New Right could not be very effective in cultivating consent for neoliberal policy moves unless media discourse also operated in the negative ideological dimension to mystify, distort, limit and even, sometimes, outright deceive — in Page and Shapiro's (1992) language, to “manipulate:” it is implausible that large numbers of Americans who would be materially disadvantaged in significant ways by this right-flank assault on New Deal-Great Society political-economic arrangements would actively signal their acquiescence in opinion polls unless they were — at least provisionally and temporarily — persuaded that they would benefit from these moves.<sup>47</sup> Thus, as I show in the case studies in Chapters 4 through 7, mainstream news clearly favored New Right voices and frames — in part because opposition forces (for a variety of complex reasons) failed to articulate alternative discursive

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<sup>47</sup> While this negative ideological distortion was not simply (or even primarily) the outcome of conscious strategic communication campaigns, we should not minimize the importance of these. This stage of my study will not empirically engage questions of elite intentionality vs. structural or institutional influences that refract the forms and substance of news coverage. As I discuss in Chapter 9, addressing this matter would require, among other tasks, archival research on the inner workings of the growing state and civil society communications institutions that accompanied the rise of the New Right. Such analyses must address the role of emerging conservative intellectual and public-relations apparatuses, such as the Heritage Foundation and Hoover Institution, which were financed by wealthy corporate donors through sources like the Olin, Coors and Scaife foundations.

From a larger conceptual standpoint, intentionality is a secondary — though important — question: I believe that exploration of potential “elite manipulation” — or the circulation of ideological representations that legitimate dominant power relations — should be guided by reference not so much to the goals or intentions of particular media communicators, as by the nature and implications of messages in terms of popular democratic prerogatives and capacities. As Edelman (1988: 125) writes, “explanation is more adequate when it deals in actions, structural conditions and consequences than when it deals in the attribution of intentions.” At the same time, my understanding of the negative dimension of ideology in terms of media distortion and misrepresentation includes the assumption — which is supported by growing empirical evidence in the American context (e.g. Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Jacobs 2011) — that “individual consciousness or intention” (Larrain 1996: 48) does play some significant role in these dynamics, and that ideological operations sometimes do “function like conscious class propaganda” (ibid: 31), in the sense of carefully designed communications offensives meant to mislead audiences in the service of certain power arrangements or political projects (on “propaganda” defined in this way in opposition to “persuasion,” see Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 2004).

packages that construct other configurations of common sense, material conditions and aspirations, and public policies. The result has been the consistent priming or activation of conservative-leaning mental connections in the context of particular policy episodes. Such dynamics are especially powerful when the proposals at issue are technical and arcane: because of its political-economic position and the professional routines this encourages, mass media is unlikely to circulate concrete policy information that might encourage skepticism of the attractive and culturally resonant claims offered by elite interests. Thus, media discourse has operated on two levels to shape substantive popular understandings in ways that furthered neoliberal policies and power configurations: first, the frames circulated by New Right (and later, “New Democrat”) voices — though ideologically constructive in that they offered powerful discursive and material articulations — were systematically partial and limited in their representations of public policy and political economy. Second, these views were pervasive in mainstream news and infrequently criticized or challenged by counter-frames from elites, let alone by counter-hegemonic interpretations from non-governmental social voices.

Certainly, Reagan, Gingrich and their allies were not uniformly successful in enacting their desired policies, although in the realm of domestic social welfare, taxation and economic regulation broadly conceived, they were arguably more successful than is often supposed. However, neoliberal-New Right forces *were* stunningly successful in changing the terms of discourse — i.e. shifting the way many Americans think, talk and write about these issues — which consequently helped to change not only many material aspects of state administration and policy outcomes, but also shifted the sets of social and economic visions that are afforded space on the legitimate national agenda, thus engendering further policy victories. These successes were both reflected in and reinforced through the negative

ideological operations of a systematically constrained news media discourse, even as hegemonic communications were effective in generating mass consent for the right turn by evoking and activating — via positive ideological operations — selectively reconfigured elements of American popular common sense, as expressed through polls on major issues at this historical conjuncture.

From a neo-Gramscian perspective, it should be no surprise that the New Right has not been totally effective in moving policy discourse, agendas and outcomes, nor that core elements of its vision have survived in modified forms during periods of Democratic Party control of state apparatuses: hegemonic processes do *not* involve seamless domination, and total or final victory. Rather, they are concerned with the discursive and material stitching together of coalitions under a dominant ideological vision and socioeconomic-political project. Indeed, we can understand the Clintonite New Democrat phenomenon (which we may be seeing in a somewhat different guise in the Obama administration) as a strategic move by certain party factions to incorporate themselves into the conservative hegemony. To be sure, there are real and materially consequential differences between the New Democrat social vision and domestic policy program, on the one hand, and the Reaganite-George W. Bush project, on the other, that should not be minimized.<sup>48</sup> However, these differences obscure an important underlying ideological unity within the basic neoliberal-New Right hegemony, which has acted as a kind of force field generating discursive and policy tendencies that have proven difficult to break, and have defined the grounds of struggle in the class politics of contemporary U.S. domestic policy. In these ways, the hegemonic project that took shape in the 1970s and 1980s and became consolidated by the 1990s was relatively effective in neutralizing potential critics — such as major Democratic

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<sup>48</sup> On the substantial economic policy and performance differences under Democratic and Republican presidents over the last 50 years, see Bartels (2008).

Party elements and supporting center-left institutions — and marginalizing core opponents in left-liberal political and radical non-governmental groups.<sup>49</sup>

Considerable tension, unevenness, contradiction and instability characterized the mass media-public opinion processes by which a measure of popular consent for the neoliberal domestic policy order was achieved. My case studies will demonstrate that news coverage of the 1981 tax and budget plan and the 1996 welfare reform law was not homogeneously friendly to New Right voices and themes, and, further, that political views outside the conservative hegemonic framework — and even outside the dying New Deal-Great Society conception — were developed and propagated by elite and nongovernmental actors. And my experimental evidence on the individual-level mechanisms by which such ideological conceptions can influence expressed policy preferences will show that many people exposed to strongly hegemonic discourse in the form of realistic news texts do critically evaluate and resist these messages. However, as I discuss in Chapter 9, while they stress ideological instability and the possibilities for challenge and struggle, neo-Gramscian understandings of hegemony and common sense — as applied empirically to major contemporary U.S. policy debates — also indicate that nothing approaching overwhelming popular consensus as expressed in polls is necessary to fuel changes in governance with momentous implications for material power arrangements and social conditions.

### **VIII. Epistemology and Empirics: Science as Descriptive, Explanatory and Critical**

To undertake an empirically grounded and systematic analysis of news media discourse geared toward critically illuminating ideological operations requires engaging some thorny epistemological matters that have long bedeviled scholars in both the scientific-

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<sup>49</sup> As Harvey (2005: 63) wrote of Reagan and Thatcher: “Their genius was to create a legacy and a tradition that tangled subsequent politicians in a web of constraints from which they could not easily escape. Those who followed, like Clinton and (UK Prime Minister Tony) Blair, could do little more than continue the good work of neoliberalization, whether they liked it or not.” Blair’s so-called “New Labor” accommodation with the neoliberal hegemony is a close analogue to the Clintonite-New Democrat ideological response in the United States.



empirical and critical-cultural wings of mass communication research. As I suggest in Section III, many positivistically oriented scholars who subscribe to a strong ethic of scientific neutrality and objectivity have shied away from studying phenomena like “elite manipulation of public opinion” because of reluctance to pass judgment on questions of truth and falsehood in political discourse, and thus have been unable to grasp what a mass media environment presenting “the best available information and analysis” (Page and Shapiro 1992) might look like. At the same time, many contemporary cultural studies authors — especially those heavily influenced by poststructuralism and postmodernism — have tended especially to reject negative understandings of ideology because these conceptualizations seem to imply an elitist view of professional intellectuals as qualified to make judgments of “Truth” in social reality that are presumed illegitimate from a post-positivist perspective. Such evaluations, according to this perspective, are said to be valid only from the uniquely partial and specific subject-position — as well as from within the particular “discourse” — of the scholar.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, the standards of rigor to which we might plausibly peg an analysis such as the one I present have proved elusive to scholars in both broad traditions of media research. In this final section, I briefly situate my approach — which relies on “critical realism” (Sayer 2010 [1984]; Isaac 1987) — in this contested epistemological field. In so doing, I introduce the strategies for news coverage and public opinion analysis that I describe more fully in Chapter 3.

There has been much discussion — sometimes bordering on intellectual combat — about the apparently incommensurable assumptions of broadly critical-cultural approaches to mass communication, on the one hand, and so-called scientific-empirical perspectives, on

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<sup>50</sup> Some have gone so far as to make the strong claim that the concept of “ideology” itself has lost theoretical and practical value (if it ever had any) in the freewheeling postmodern era of infinitely open texts, decentralized and untamable information networks, resistance through the “pleasure” of consumption, and localized identity politics (Turner 2003 [1990]: 181-9)

the other.<sup>51</sup> My study offers a way to bridge these divides through the *critical realist* approach (Sayer 2010 [1984]; Isaac 1987). Critical realism's aim is to use a variety of methods to explicate the causal powers and mechanisms that operate in particular historical contexts, while remaining grounded in a commitment to social critique based on the inescapable differences between studying human and non-human phenomena. Moreover, unlike strong versions of interpretivism and social constructionism, critical realism simultaneously emphasizes some crucial similarities between social science and natural science, based on an acknowledgement of the materiality of human relations. Because outcomes are always open-ended, causal mechanisms are not determinative in the strict sense; rather, they establish the major tendencies — or conditions of possibility — for political and social relations that may or may not be activated in particular contexts, may or may not produce directly observable empirical regularities, and usually operate in complex ways on multiple levels of analysis.<sup>52</sup> Thus, valid empirical work requires abstracting particular — and partial — dimensions from complex sets of concrete relations, identifying necessary and contingent causal mechanisms, and producing an account that — while always fallible and limited — is nevertheless grounded in evidence and cohesive argument. I approach my work from the assumption that doing empirical research does not necessarily imply an “empiricist” philosophy of science, a positivist epistemology or a strictly behaviorist notion of scientific laws and causality. Knowledge is never completely unbiased (in part because social phenomena are “concept-dependent,” though certainly not reducible to concepts); there are no final, definitive or

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<sup>51</sup> As Lewis (2001: 5) writes of the often-territorial relations between quantitatively oriented public opinion and media researchers and qualitatively-oriented scholars of cultural studies and critical theory, “both sides have often focused more on the egregious aspects of the other than on their more careful or incisive moments.” And see Shapiro and Wendt (2005: 22): “For a realist, whether and to what degree competing explanations are incommensurable is a question for investigation, not a philosophical fiat.” Indeed, scholars in the field of communication studies (e.g. Carragee and Roefs 2004) have called for research that links social scientific methodologies and concepts regarding media coverage and attitude formation with critically oriented theoretical frameworks focusing on the operation of power.

<sup>52</sup> See Gramsci 2005 [1971]: 408): “Politics is in fact at any given time the reflection of the tendencies of development in the structure, but it is not necessarily the case that these tendencies must be realized.”

incontestable truth claims independent of historical and social context; and the development of general covering laws for politics — in the same way that researchers are said to have discovered general laws for the hard sciences — is neither an appropriate nor a practicable goal, although we can use empirical methods to draw out historically bounded generalizations.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time, I do assume that there exist real political and social phenomena that have both material and cultural-linguistic dimensions. As Hall (1985: 103) writes in challenging certain post-structuralist accounts that result in discursive reductionism: “Every social practice is constituted within the interplay of meaning and representation and can itself be represented. In other words, there is no social practice outside of ideology. However, this does not mean that, because all social practices are within the discursive, there is nothing to social practice *but* discourse.”<sup>54</sup> Language, systems of meaning, human behavior and material structures are, as Sayer (2010 [1984]: 33) writes, borrowing from Raymond Williams, “reciprocally confirming.”

Moreover — while it is neither desirable nor possible to remove scholarly work from its social, economic, political and cultural context<sup>55</sup> — it is both possible and worthwhile to develop provisionally valid knowledge claims that enlarge and deepen our understanding by carefully and sensitively using a variety of systematic methods of inquiry.<sup>56</sup> Thus, despite the

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<sup>53</sup> As Isaac (1987: 70) put it, “theoretical practice, and the dialectic between competing theories, is a protracted process of contestation and reasoned judgment in which there can be no Archimedean point of scientific certainty.” On the pitfalls of imperialistic generalizations and their implications for the possibilities of positing broadly applicable social laws, see Sayer 2010 [1984]: 99-103).

For a useful discussion of scientific realism in social science, its departures from both logical empiricism and strong interpretivism, and its applicability to empirical research that relies heavily on the analysis of consent in Gaventa (1980), see Shapiro and Wendt (2005).

<sup>54</sup> Or, as Clarke (1991: 179, n. 9) writes, “subject to Baudrillard’s disagreement, texts do not exhaust reality.”

<sup>55</sup> See (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 6): “Science or the production of any other kind of knowledge is a social practice. For better or worse (not just worse) the conditions and social relations of the production of knowledge influence its content.” This tenet of critical realism — among many others — resonates strongly with Gramsci’s view of “intellectuals” in society, referenced in fn. 10.

<sup>56</sup> As Isaac (1987: 71) writes, “the great virtue of realism is that, in recognizing the necessary limits of any methodological approach, it can shift social inquiry from a concern with specious canons of scientificity to a concern with substantive

centrality of human interpretation — on a number of levels — in this study, and despite my commitment to the importance of cultural and historical context, I do not think scholarship is completely relative or is simply reducible to discourse or to one’s ideological position: “the admission that all knowledge is fallible does not mean that all knowledge is equally fallible.” (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 68) There are better and worse configurations of empirical evidence that may be marshaled to support a claim, better and worse applications of various methods of inquiry, and more cogent or less cogent interpretations of evidence: As Sayer (2010 [1984]: 5) puts it, “knowledge is not immune to empirical check, and its effectiveness in informing and explaining successful material practice is not mere accident.”<sup>57</sup>

Consequently, while I situate my research enterprise firmly in the mode of critical theory, focusing on questions of ideological power and the meaning of political discourse, I diverge sharply from the strongest forms of postmodernism, which assert the complete indeterminacy and relativity of language and meaning, and thus of political experience and activity. Postmodern approaches contribute significantly to social analysis, particularly in their close attention to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual identity and other forms of submerged “difference.” But their extremely decentered stance can operate to remove any leverage for the evaluation of social practices and institutions by denying the possibility for grounds by which power relations can be critiqued with an eye toward conscious activism and emancipatory change: as Clarke (1991: 103) writes of the pretense of radical struggle that some forms of postmodern theorizing espouse, “although the repertoire of cynicism...involves a form of refusal, it is nevertheless demobilizing: a state of *passive*

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explanation.” Both Sayer (2010 [1984]) and Shapiro and Wendt (2005) argue that while the assumptions of logical empiricism continue to inform how many empirical scholars and philosophers of social science describe their activity, most working social scientific researchers actually *practice* their craft as if they were realists.

<sup>57</sup> As Isaac (1987: 64) writes, “in the realist view scientific theories are most definitely susceptible to falsification, if we mean by this susceptible to criticism and refutation.”

dissent. The playfulness of postmodernism evokes precisely this emotional and/or political disinvestment: a refusal to be engaged.”<sup>58</sup>

While I reject the easy relativism of some forms of postmodernism — in which knowledge is reducible to particular subject positions, which are subsequently unmoored from material practices and social relations — I do not believe that values can (or should) be banished from scholarship. All of us are enmeshed in social, economic, political and cultural relations that constitute the grounds from which we conduct research — and which, furthermore, constitute the very phenomena we study:

In order to understand and explain social phenomena, we cannot avoid evaluating and criticizing societies’ own self-understanding...Moreover, criticism cannot reasonably be limited to false ideas, abstracted from the practical contexts in which they are constitutive, but must extend to critical evaluation of their associated practices and the material structures which they produce and which in turn help to sustain those practices. (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 39, 40)

In other words, social science — because its focus of study is the complex, interlocked set of practices and understandings that constitute human action — is inconsistent with its stated aims of interrogating unexamined knowledge by recourse to empirically informed argument if it fails to critically evaluate such practices and understandings from the perspective of what *could be*.<sup>59</sup> Critical realism, then, resists the imperialisms of both empiricist scientism and interpretivist discourse studies, while drawing on the strengths of each in an approach that stresses the simultaneous materiality and concept-dependence of social phenomena, and the inherently evaluative character of a coherent science of human relations.

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<sup>58</sup> See also Calhoun (1992), Garnham (1992), Turner (2003 [1990]: 189-95), Fraser (1989) and Hall (1980b: 161-2) on the liabilities of postmodernism. See Hall (1985) on the different treatments of ideology in material-cultural critical theory, on the one hand, and strong versions of postmodernism and poststructuralism, on the other.

<sup>59</sup>As Sayer (2010 [1984]: 41-2) writes, critical realism “implies a different view of the social role of this type of knowledge and for ‘intellectuals.’ It means that social science should not be seen as developing a stock of knowledge about an object which is external to us, but should develop a critical self-awareness in people as subjects and indeed assist in their emancipation.”

Critical scholarship in its most defensible and meaningful form includes the careful description and explanation of what *is* in society — both its generalities and its particularities — as well as empirically informed critique of these phenomena based on assessment of what “*might be* from the point of view of emancipation.” (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 256, emphasis added)

This last impulse likely elicits the most discomfort from empirical scholars working — explicitly or tacitly — within more orthodox understandings of epistemology and the philosophy of science. While the radical implications of this perspective should not be soft-pedaled, seen from another standpoint it merely extends the underlying logic of scientific research and intellectual production from the relatively privileged level of professional scholars — and, directly or indirectly, elite interests like government policymakers and corporations — to people at large:

Learning, as the reduction of illusion and ignorance, can help to free us from domination by hitherto unacknowledged constraints, dogmas and falsehoods... What is wrong if researchers stimulate this potentially emancipatory change in others in the process of trying to achieve it for themselves?” (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 252)

Blurring the dogmatic lines that divide critical-cultural and social scientific perspectives on research is an important step in building a thoroughly critical science of political communication that is relevant to the enormous social changes and challenges that lie just outside academic offices. This is an enterprise toward which I hope the present study contributes in some significant measure.

## Chapter 3 -- Methodology and Research Design: Sketches for a Critical Science of Communication

### I. Introduction

As I discussed in the final section of the last chapter, critical realism allows for a variety of quantitative and qualitative methodological strategies and techniques. This ontological-epistemological perspective requires mainly that researchers clearly acknowledge the strengths and limitations of these tools, avoid both crude empiricism and discursive reductionism, and embrace the overarching and interdependent goals of description, causal explanation and social critique. Thus, my study of mainstream media discourse and the dynamics of popular consent during the rightward turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy in the neoliberal era includes quantitative content analysis, qualitative textual analysis and a quantitatively oriented communications-effects experiment.

I begin this chapter by briefly explaining the role of each of these methods in my project, highlighting how they operate within the critical-realist paradigm. I then sketch the basic logic of my content analyses, discussing the selection of news media reports and the coding procedure. After this, I proceed to explain critical semiotics as I understand and employ this approach in the second stage of each of my two case studies, discussing the particular benefits of this textual interpretative strategy in light of my epistemological-theoretical framework and substantive agenda. I end by outlining the general logic of my experimental analysis, saving description of the concrete design for Chapter 8. The Appendix at the end of the study contains more extensive methodological information and materials, including a detailed outline of the coding schemes for my content analyses, reproductions of major textual materials that I examine in my semiotic analyses, and technical notes on the design, execution and key variables of my experiment.

## II. Critical-Realist Analysis in Practice: Leveraging Intensive and Extensive Media Research

In the tradition of a critical-realist approach that sees social science as simultaneously an enterprise of description, explanation and critique aimed at assisting human emancipation, my broad aims in this project are integrally related and mutually dependent : 1) to explain the shape of public opinion poll results during key policy episodes over the last 30 years, and thus, to contribute toward understanding how and why the U.S. political economy has undergone a significant shift to the right. 2) to abstract from the concrete, multidimensional processes in these cases to advance some more general — though historically limited — statements about larger dynamics concerning the ideological power of mainstream news media and the cultivation of mass consent through poll results. 3) to explore — if only partially and indirectly — how these dynamics might operate differently under different conditions, and thus, to inform contemporary academic and popular debate about what it means for a political communications system to be “democratic.”

My overall approach in this project is what Sayer (2010 [1984]: 242) might term “intensive,” in that “the primary questions concern how some causal process works out in a particular case or limited number of cases.” I am interested most centrally in understanding how mainstream news media coverage may have affected U.S. public opinion during key policy episodes over the last 30 years, thus shaping the dynamics of popular consent for the neoliberal-New Right turn. In that sense, I must take special care to avoid the pitfalls of overgeneralization from a small number of cases. Indeed, the tentative generalizations I advance in Chapter 9 are bounded spatially and temporally by the social-political-economic circumstances that characterize the historical period in question.



However, *within* my case studies of the Reagan economic plan and of welfare reform — and within my experimental analysis — I partially employ an *extensive* approach: in the former, I conduct quantitative content analyses of large populations or representative samples of news texts; in the latter, I investigate quantitatively measured relationships between exposure to different kinds of news discourse and expressed policy preferences and political perceptions in a sample of people drawn from the larger U.S. news audience. These analytic techniques are aimed at “discovering some of the common properties and general patterns of a population as a whole.” (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 242) Of course, the empirical regularities I observe in these “populations” (be they composed of news stories or the attitudes that people report on surveys) are themselves contingent on particular, historically specific material and discursive contexts: from the critical-realist perspective, it is both impractical and senseless to aim at producing universal generalizations of social action.<sup>1</sup>

In the experimental analysis, I offer people simulated news stories and gauge their reactions to this discourse by analyzing expressed political perceptions and policy preferences. My aim here is to intervene in the causal mechanisms of ideological power that I posit, and preliminarily explore how the propagation of hegemonic understandings — or “elite manipulation of public opinion” (Page and Shapiro 1992) — might operate at the intersection between macro-level media discourse and the micro-level processes that shape popular consciousness. I interpret this evidence in light of both psychological theories of political cognition and expression — primarily media framing (e.g. Entman 1993, 2007) and the priming of considerations (Zaller 1992) — and categories drawn from neo-Gramscian critical theory — primarily popular common sense (Gramsci 2005 [1971]) and Hall’s (1985) concept of ideological articulation. While many of the statistically derived results that I

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<sup>1</sup> On “intensive” vs. “extensive” empirical research generally, see Sayer (2010 [1984]: 241-51).

present are technically labeled “descriptive” (rather than “inferential”), the analytic leverage provided by this kind of random-assignment experiment under relatively controlled conditions means that I can more confidently advance claims about causal mechanisms and relationships than would be the case in non-experimental survey research.

My broad analytical strategy is one of triangulation — i.e., I approach the phenomena I am interested in from a variety of different angles and with a variety of methodological tools, and I corroborate my findings and arguments by comparing the various species of evidence I collect to each other, and to the theoretical and historical narrative I laid out in the last chapter. This project exemplifies “problem-driven” research (Shapiro 2005: 178-203): I chose particular methods based on their potential value for explaining a set of historical phenomena, and I rely on the soundness of my technique, the coherence and comprehensiveness of my evidence, and the historical and conceptual cogency of my argument — rather than on “specious canons of scientificity” (Isaac 1987: 71) — to make my case. Finally, I view research as a recursive practice that entails a continual dialogue between theory and evidence — or “abstract” and “concrete” research, respectively (Sayer 2010 [1984]) — in which both conceptual frameworks and findings are always to some extent tentative and open to revision.

### **III. Content Analysis: Capturing News Environments by Mapping Key Patterns of Policy Coverage**

Research in political psychology and communication studies suggests that a number of different media coverage dimensions can contribute toward shaping public opinion. These include the frequency of specific messages (or frames) favoring a particular side of an issue, the substantive content of those frames (i.e., the particular considerations that media messages are likely to prime in audience consciousness), the informational content circulated

by news outlets (e.g. facts about tax or welfare policy that may be presented), the specific actors who propagate media messages (e.g. the president, representatives of particular political parties, interest groups and so on: who makes an argument is a key variable that shapes whether audiences will see the message as credible), and the overall tone of news reports. All these factors — as they interact with individual-level audience characters and dimensions of the broader socio-political environment — can play a part in shaping policy attitudes.

Therefore, gaining a comprehensive understanding of the potential for hegemonic (or potentially counter-hegemonic) media coverage to affect poll results on particular policy issues — thus generating signals of popular consent for (or dissent from) government actions that shape power arrangements — requires (among other theoretical and methodological tools) a comprehensive approach to content analysis that is focused on key dimensions of news coverage. While researchers should avoid fetishizing quantitative (as well as qualitative) methods (i.e. where statistical manipulations are valued for their own sake as uniquely powerful tools for understanding the social world), many techniques in this tradition can generate crucial species of evidence that other methods cannot reach: previous research has shown that in the case of media influence on public opinion, “numbers” do matter. At its best, careful, theoretically sensitive quantitative content analysis can provide highly reliable concrete evidence concerning broad patterns of media coverage. This is what I aim to offer in Chapters 4 and 6.

To that end, I conduct systematic quantitative analyses of mass-market television and print news coverage during the crucial periods of policy debate in each of my case studies. For the Reagan economic plan, I analyze ABC, CBS and NBC network evening news reports from January 1, 1981 (just before the president took office for his first term), through

August 13, 1981 (the day he signed the tax legislation). I examined the entire plausible universe of stories on the issue that appeared on the three news programs for a period of approximately seven-and-a-half months, comprising a total of 145 separate TV segments.<sup>2</sup> I chose network television because it was — and remains, though at a significantly lower magnitude — the major source for Americans’ national political and public policy news (Graber 2005). In addition, the network news audience more closely resembled the demographic profile of the nation as a whole than did any other television option available at the time. Thus, the potential for discourse circulated through these outlets to directly affect the shape of popular consent as expressed in opinion polls was greater than for other U.S. TV news venues.<sup>3</sup>

I supplement this data with a nearly identical examination of Associated Press newspaper stories from the same time period. Because the number of relevant AP reports is too large for a feasible analysis along the numerous content dimensions I target, I used a random-number generator to collect a sample of 257 stories, or an average of about eight reports per week. This sample represents about 33 percent of all potentially relevant AP

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<sup>2</sup> I searched the online abstracts of the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive for mentions of “Reagan” and “tax” in the time period under examination. I dropped any reports that were clearly irrelevant, such as those dealing solely with the federal gasoline tax, which was a policy not engaged by the legislation I examine here.

I focus most closely in this case study on the debate over the tax legislation, but this policy was often discussed in news coverage in relation to the package of administration-endorsed domestic budget cuts and military spending increases that Congress passed that same year. Moreover, the issue of social welfare and business regulatory spending is clearly relevant to my larger substantive and theoretical argument, and to the broader representations of taxation that I explore in the context of the New Right’s ascendance into institutional American politics. Thus, in stories about the 1981 tax plan I analyze content engaging these budget issues, but for reasons of feasibility I do not analyze news reports that dealt solely with federal spending without mentioning taxes. I expect to conduct these additional content analyses in future iterations of the project.

<sup>3</sup> Despite the increasing availability of cable TV, print and online sources, the significant leadership in audience share for network evening news continues even today (Graber 2005; Pew Center 2009). In 1981, the so-called Big Three news programs were inarguably dominant, as not only the Internet but cable news was virtually nonexistent. CNN debuted later in 1981, but it offered extremely sparse coverage at the time. Fox News Channel and MSNBC were still more than a decade away. A few independent channels served markets in major cities.

PBS, of course, did have a well-established nightly evening news program in 1981, but its audience was much smaller and more socioeconomically upscale than were those for the Big Three networks. Moreover, from the standpoint of potential structural political-economic determinants of coverage, PBS’s status as a largely taxpayer- and donation-funded service (especially in 1981) places it in a different category than the fully corporate and commercial outlets that dominated the TV news landscape at the time. And in this period before the widespread penetration of cable channels, viewers had few non-news programming options in the 6 to 7 p.m. time slot, thus further boosting the ABC, CBS and NBC news audience (Prior 2007).

stories. I chose the Associated Press because this wire service was the closest approximation of a mass-circulation national newspaper in 1981. AP reports were distributed widely to urban, regional, small city and rural daily papers nationwide, making the Associated Press the dominant source of national political and public policy content for the American mass public outside of network TV. In contrast, the so-called prestige press (typically considered *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal*) reaches smaller readerships consisting of more affluent, highly educated and socially powerful constituencies.<sup>4</sup>

I followed a similar data selection strategy for welfare reform. In this case, I analyze every ABC, CBS and NBC evening news story on the issue that appeared from January 1, 1995 (just before the Gingrich-led “Republican Revolution” Congress took office), through August 22, 1996 (the day President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act). I supplement this by analyzing the few welfare stories from CNN’s evening news program that aired during this period.<sup>5</sup> In all, this approach produced a dataset of 54 news reports.<sup>6</sup> In analyzing print coverage of welfare reform, I examine the entire universe of *USA Today* stories on the issue during the same 1995-1996 time period, resulting in a newspaper dataset containing 60 separate stories.<sup>7</sup> I chose *USA Today* because

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<sup>4</sup> I identified relevant news stories by searching the LexisNexis online archive for all AP reports in the time period under examination that mentioned “Reagan” and “tax” anywhere in their full texts. I then used the random-number generator to cull a sample of 25 percent for potential analysis.

Some stories that were randomly tagged included no substantial content on the 1981 tax plan. Some reports were irrelevant, for example mentioning a state visit by a foreign leader who noted the high taxes in his country. Others were primarily about separate issues, with perhaps one or two sentences providing an update on the legislative progress of the Reagan plan. Yet others were nearly identical versions of reports I had already coded.

In these cases, I simply moved on in sequence to the story immediately following that identified by the random-number generator. This procedure ultimately increased my sample of AP coverage from about one quarter to about one third of the plausible universe of relevant stories. In analyzing these reports, I did not code headlines.

<sup>5</sup> In 1993, 60 percent of survey respondents said they *regularly* watched one of the three major evening network TV news broadcasts (Pew Center 2006). At the time, CNN was the dominant player in national cable news.

<sup>6</sup> I used a similar selection strategy for TV content on welfare reform as I did for the Reagan economic plan, searching the Vanderbilt abstracts for “Clinton” and “welfare,” and dropping stories not focused predominantly on welfare policy.

<sup>7</sup> I identified relevant stories by searching the LexisNexis online archive for all *USA Today* reports in the time period under examination that mentioned “Clinton” and “welfare” anywhere in their full texts. I dropped stories that clearly were not focused on welfare reform. These omitted reports included some that did not include content on the issue (such as stories about welfare systems in other nations), others that were primarily about separate policy issues (with perhaps one or two sentences on the legislative progress of welfare reform), some that were brief one- or two-paragraph summary updates

this outlet was a reasonable approximation of mainstream, national, mass-market print news during the period, with a wide geographic reach and a readership that was fairly representative along key demographic dimensions.

A number of theoretical issues prompted me to analyze both visual and print forms of news discourse. Many scholars have argued that TV coverage amplifies the major political communications conventions of mainstream U.S. news in general, including the heavy reliance on national Republican and Democratic elites and other official sources; the narrow and negative coverage of interest groups and nongovernmental organizations; the strong focus on dramatic and personalized elite strategy, institutional process and internal government procedure at the expense of policy substance; and framings that mute or ignore the structural and institutional contexts of social and political issues. Moreover, from the perspective of media's role in shaping citizen attitudes and generating patterns of popular consent for public policies and political arrangements, there is evidence that certain formal characteristics may make visual content especially potent in cultivating dominant ideological understandings.<sup>8</sup> While the empirical differences derived from media format ought not to be exaggerated, painting a rich picture of news discourse that can provide a foundation for critical analysis requires systematic content comparisons between TV and print outlets, which my study accomplishes.

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presented in a "round-up" of national news, and some that were about electoral politics and simply mentioned welfare as one of several key campaign issues. I did not code masthead editorials, op-ed pieces, editorial cartoons or story headlines.  
<sup>8</sup> For instance, the elaboration-likelihood model (ELM) of persuasion (Petty et al. 2002) suggests that among several contextual factors or conditions that make superficial processing more likely is exposure to formats — such as TV — that (at least until recent years) did not allow self-pacing and the opportunity for audiences to pause and review content at their leisure. This formal characteristic reduces people's opportunities to carefully and actively engage with messages, instead promoting dependence on simple cues, such as those contained in strategically constructed (or uncritically circulated) elite frames. Moreover, the *shorter* news segments — compared to print and some Internet formats — that dominate TV simply afford less space for detailed presentation of information and analysis. Messaris and Abraham (2001) discuss a number of other formal characteristics that may make TV especially powerful in shaping ideological perceptions, focusing on the nature-like appearance of visual imagery and, especially, the unobtrusiveness of the frames circulated by this mode of communication.

For each news report in both case studies, I coded for eight major elements: 1) primary topical focus, 2) secondary topical focus, 3) identity of each source, 4) source category, such as Reagan or Clinton administration official, (non-administration) Democratic or Republican Party official, conservative or progressive interest group/social movement source and so on, 5) frame employed in each source's statement, 6) frame employed in any unattributed statement made by a journalist, 7) certain factual information about the policy plans, and 8) directional thrust of the story as a whole. I address major coding procedures and criteria here. Lists and descriptions of story focus, source, frame and information designation codes are in the Appendix.

To organize the framing analyses, I consulted secondary academic and journalistic literature and contemporary primary sources — such as political speeches and news stories — to make initial lists of possible frames related to the 1981 economic plan and to welfare reform. As I conducted the content analyses, I gradually added items to these lists, ending with 12 possible frames for the first case, and 25 for the second case, plus a miscellaneous category for “other.”<sup>9</sup> Each source (named or unnamed, directly quoted or paraphrased) that appeared in the news and made any statement received a frame code. I view these frames as analytically distinct interpretations of the policy, the political dynamics surrounding it, and related matters that operate to select and emphasize certain issue dimensions, thus explicitly asserting or implicitly suggesting that audiences should take particular stances. Most substantive frames in these case studies focus on the purported effects of the policies (e.g.

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<sup>9</sup> The greater number of frame categories is primarily due to the relatively greater complexity of the welfare policy issue as I understood it from background reading and exploratory textual analyses. As I show in Chapter 6, relatively few of these frames appeared with any frequency in mainstream news coverage during 1995 and 1996, and many did not appear at all. This underlines media's role as a hegemonic mechanism which filters the information and discourse that form the substantive bases for most people's policy opinions.

the Reagan tax plan will boost the national economy),<sup>10</sup> or the proper role of government in socioeconomic affairs (e.g. social programs are expensive, wasteful and/or ineffective).<sup>11</sup>

In determining the directional thrust of each story, I selected from one of five possible codes, ranging from “very favorable” to “very unfavorable.” This coding category was designed to roughly indicate the news report’s likely *overall* effect on the typical American’s opinion toward the policy proposal. I combined three main factors in evaluating directional thrust, using neutral as the presumed starting point: 1) the balance of source-frames included in the story. Thus, if a report contained more statements positive toward neoliberal-New Right policy goals than statements that were negative, this would tend to push the story’s directional thrust in the favorable direction, 2) the implications of essentially neutral information contained in the news report. In other words, aside from the direction of source-frames, I asked in what direction the information or events reported would likely push the typical news viewer’s or reader’s opinion. Thus, if a story was based largely on a report from a progressive interest group criticizing the Reagan administration’s proposed tax cuts for disproportionately benefiting the wealthy, this would push the directional thrust in the unfavorable direction, 3) the overall “tone” of the report. This criterion was intended to capture more nuanced elements of the story — beyond the balance of favorable and unfavorable source-frames, and beyond the presumably factual information provided — that might influence viewers’ and readers’ opinions and perceptions. These elements included the implicit assumptions upon which the story was based and the tone of the language used by anchors and reporters. For example, when journalists themselves suggested — without

<sup>10</sup> I designate this frame “macroeconomic stimulus (pro).”

<sup>11</sup> I tag this frame “fed-government programs (con).”

I should emphasize that my categorizations in Chapters 4 and 6 of statements into pro- or anti- perspectives does not imply that anti- statements necessarily expressed fundamental or vehement criticism of the neoliberal-New Right initiatives in my case studies or the ideological positions on which these policies were based. Instead, I considered as valenced against these policy proposals any statement that expressed a modicum of substantive skepticism or criticism. This coding strategy is deliberately intended to be cautious, in the sense that it is aimed at capturing even faint signals of dissent from the rightward turn.



polling evidence — that “public opinion” was on President Reagan’s side, this would tend to push the directional thrust of the story in the favorable direction.

While these criteria require a significant measure of interpretation, I designed my coding scheme in order to capture a large number of distinct and potentially important elements of news story construction that are not reachable through computerized content analysis programs. I do not claim to be comprehensive in my approach to analyzing mainstream news coverage during U.S. social welfare and economic policy debates, only more comprehensive and more systematic than previous studies I am aware of. My approach is unusual in three ways. First, I coded the full content of news reports on these policy issues over long periods of public debate, rather than following typical practices of coding just headlines, abstracts or lead paragraphs (see, e.g., Danielian and Page 1994; Lawrence 2000). Second, whenever feasible, I analyzed the universe of relevant mainstream news stories on the topic (as I note above, for the Reagan economic plan I selected a large random sample of print reports), rather than assuming that sampling alone would sufficiently capture mass media environment. Finally, I collected data on a large and diverse set of news content elements that might be important in shaping public opinion, rather than, for example, simply coding at the story level for overall favorability.<sup>12</sup>

While labor-intensive, my strategy is optimal when aiming to provide a foundation for understanding how news coverage of public policy issues can facilitate or subvert hegemonic ideological understandings in audiences: if we want to make inferences about how substantive, expansive and diverse are the voices and perspectives propagated through mainstream media coverage, we must provide broad and rich depictions of that coverage; among other things, that means coding the full text of large volumes of stories. Moreover,

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<sup>12</sup> See Althaus (2003) for a notable exception to common limited media content coding practices.

psychological and communication research has identified a number of message characteristics that shape the processes and outcomes of public opinion influence: if we want to make plausible inferences about the effects of news coverage on popular consent for public policies and political arrangements, we need to code for a variety of distinctly relevant content characteristics. In these ways, my analytic approach is a promising model for future research that seeks to identify the broader political sources of mass opinion.

#### **IV. Semiotic Discourse Analysis: Understanding Cultural and Material Dimensions in Historical Context**

Assessing the role that news coverage plays in facilitating or subverting the subtle operations of power that Gramsci termed hegemony requires more than quantitative analyses of mass media content. A qualitative component aimed at illuminating the ideological-historical context of public policy debates and sketching the parameters of the discourse that news outlets might draw upon is also necessary. This is crucial not only to understand the cultural and political-economic forces that animate and envelope the efforts of political elites and others to propagate policy-relevant messages for popular audiences (i.e. the production of discourse), but also the forces that shape how audiences will engage with and respond to such messages by expressing attitudes and preferences in public opinion polls (i.e. the reception of discourse). I rely on a species of critical textual analysis that employs the categories of semiotics to accomplish these tasks. In this section, I introduce and describe the methodology, defining key terms that I use in presenting empirical evidence in Chapters 5 and 7. I then briefly explain why such an approach is better suited to this phase of my project than either mainstream social scientific tools or alternative post-positivist approaches to discourse analysis, and discuss how this methodology fits into the larger conceptual and empirical landscape of my project.

Conventional distinctions between quantitative and qualitative approaches to media coverage and political discourse are sometimes overdrawn. Any valid content analysis (whether executed through computer programs or “hand-coded”) is preconditioned on a context-sensitive conceptualization of the units of meaning that will later be quantitatively manipulated. This requires some initial qualitative reading of news reports, speeches, congressional debates and so on.<sup>13</sup> That said, we can think of approaches to content or discourse analysis as falling along a continuum: one end of the spectrum includes sophisticated quantitative techniques that aim (often with the aid of specialized software programs) to capture the prevalence and placement of fairly crude indicators of meaning in very large volumes of texts. On the other pole sit thoroughly qualitative approaches that rely on “close readings” of small numbers of texts (which are often deliberately “unrepresentative” of the population of discursive artifacts in a statistical sense) in order to leverage the sensitivity of human interpretative faculties, and to analyze meaning holistically in a single text (e.g. a particular speech). There are tradeoffs between these approaches: the former set of techniques allows for analyzing large volumes of material that can constitute an entire population of relevant communications, or can arguably be made statistically representative of that population. But in the process, it tends to sacrifice depth of analysis and contextual nuance. The latter set of approaches foregoes the ability to analyze large numbers of texts, but compensates through its sensitivity to context and deployment of complex human interpretative capabilities that computers (at least arguably) lack.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Of course, the thoroughness and transparency of these initial context-sensitive analyses can vary considerably from study to study.

<sup>14</sup> My process for selecting texts follows closely Sayer’s (2010 [1984]: 244-5) description of intensive research: I started with background reading on each policy case and the findings of my quantitative media content analyses, began to develop an argument about the relationship between hegemonic political discourse and public opinion, and proceeded to identify texts that (rather than being statistically representative of some larger population) manifested elements of discourse that appeared to be related *causally* to my empirical evidence as understood in context — i.e., these speeches, debates, policy papers and news stories were emblematic (or not, as in the case of counter-hegemonic messages) of the patterns of mainstream media coverage I had earlier identified.

In order to accomplish the goals I set out in this project, I needed to employ a methodological repertoire that leverages the benefits of both ends of the content-discourse analysis spectrum while minimizing the liabilities of each. I use the quantitative content analyses described in the previous section to search for key news coverage patterns in large numbers of reports while remaining appropriately sensitive to context.<sup>15</sup> But I require a different approach to thoroughly explicate the meanings of communication frames under the historical and cultural conditions that have affected the generation of mass consent for neoliberal-New Right economic and social welfare policy through mainstream media influence on public opinion. I chose to deploy a variety of critical semiotics for this task: this methodology is optimal for examining in precise detail the particular messages that appeared in news coverage during my case studies — exploring the meaning both for “senders” of these messages (i.e. political elites, their allies and journalists) and for “receivers” (American news audiences as the people whose policy thinking is represented in poll results).

Critical semiotic analysis in the tradition associated with Roland Barthes (1972 [1957]) seeks to understand discourse (whether verbal, televisual, auditory or as manifest within artifacts like clothing or buildings) as a *system of signs* whose meaning is grounded both in the internal construction of the text itself, and in the social-economic-cultural-political dimensions of communications production and reception.<sup>16</sup> The “sign” is the basic unit of meaning in semiotics: while we can recognize a sign by the presence of a key word, phrase or

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<sup>15</sup> For example, I catalogued relevant policy frames through initial qualitative readings in each case study, and my use of hand-coding allowed for some understanding of these messages in the context of particular media stories and of the policy debates generally.

<sup>16</sup> O’Sullivan et al. (1994: 281) define semiotics succinctly as “the study of the social production of meaning from sign systems.” Barthes’ work is heavily influenced by the Swiss structuralist linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, but the latter’s primary emphasis was on the relationship among signs within a text, rather than on the extension of these meanings through the realms of culture, ideology, politics and social relations. See Eco (2005) for a lucid discussion of semiotics in relation to television; see Fiske (1985) for a conceptual discussion and literature review.

visual image, no sign is reducible simply to that physical form.<sup>17</sup> Signs may be analytically broken down into two key parts: 1) the *signifier* refers to a representational figure that has an immediate physical form (in my context, a concrete written or spoken word or phrase, a television news clip or some particular image within that clip). 2) the *signified* denotes the mental concept or set of related concepts referred to by a signifier. Because meaning is always to some extent variable (i.e. there is no logically or historically fixed, one-to-one correspondence between signifier and signified), signs are understood to be *culturally produced* — or “determined” in the weaker sense of that word described by Williams (2006 [1980]). This means not only that the form of signifiers (e.g. the arrangement of squiggles that constitute a particular word in modern written English) is a cultural convention, but also — and more importantly for my purposes — that *signifieds* themselves change over time and vary across societies (and across particular groups within societies), and they carry sets of conceptual associations that have no logically or historically necessary relationship to their signifiers.

Signs carry meaning(s) within a set of cultural *codes* or conventions. Again, these codes are neither historically nor logically determined (in the stronger sense of that term). However, the empirically verifiable fact that contemporary societies are characterized by hierarchical power relations with degrees of domination and subordination (formal and informal political-economic and cultural authorities — e.g. major political parties, corporate interest groups, and news organizations — exert asymmetric influence over how meanings are “encoded” [Hall 1980a]) means that dominant codes severely *limit* the range of possible meanings (or signifieds) that audiences can read (or “decode” [ibid]) in particular signifiers.

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<sup>17</sup> In this sense, the definition of “sign” in the methodological language of semiotics and that of “frame” in my approach to content analysis (described in Section III) are very similar, although the *particular* frames that I discuss in Chapters 4 and 6 do not correspond to the particular signs I discuss in Chapters 5 and 7.

Consequently, the *relationship* between signifier and signified is crucial: again, this relationship is culturally constructed, so it can change as the direct or indirect result of social-political struggle, but dominant power arrangements often make this change very slow and difficult. This relationship between signifier and signified itself can be analytically divided into its *denotative* (i.e. “literal”) and *connotative* dimensions. I am most interested in the connotative codes that are evoked by the discourse that characterizes news stories, speeches and other political artifacts: these may be thought of as the (culturally shaped) accretion of mental (cognitive and emotional) associations attached to a word, phrase or image. We can think of an ideology as a framework that organizes these connotative codes into internally coherent systems of meaning that legitimate particular public policies and power arrangements. In the positive ideological register, such associations construct a picture of the world that enables social understanding and action.

At this point, a brief example from contemporary American politics might be useful. The signifier “big government” in the historical context of neoliberalism and the rise of the New Right refers not just denotatively to an objectively large (as in total cost, numbers of employees or extent of legal authority) state apparatus, but connotatively to arbitrary or illegitimate intrusion into private affairs, fiscal waste, inefficiency, irrationality, irresponsibility and so on. Moreover, in the dominant code of this era the phrase is generally associated with progressive taxation, regulation of business activities and social welfare provision (i.e. with the arms of the state that “distribut(e) wealth and power downward and more equitably in society” [Diamond 1995: 9]), rather than with military, internal security and law enforcement, or moral regulatory programs (those arms of the state that “enforce order” [ibid]). Thus, the *sign* “big government” (i.e. the physical form of the phrase plus its connotative associations within the dominant code) has been culturally and politically

constructed as an attack on certain domestic programs, and on the social elements that purportedly benefit from them (i.e., lower-income people [especially those who are not white men], liberal intellectuals, politicians and bureaucrats etc.).

This example brings up some crucial elements that make critical semiotics as I understand it the optimal strategy for qualitative textual analysis in my study. We see that *signification* — the process through which particular signifiers connotatively connect with particular signifieds — is an inherently *evaluative* process: no one who is aware of recent and contemporary U.S. politics would use the phrase “big government” in a positive sense, because in the dominant (though not uncontested) neoliberal-New Right political-economic code, it has been effectively connected to the negative meanings I describe above. Thus, we can begin to see how this species of semiotics has key conceptual and terminological affinities with neo-Gramscian theories of culture and communication. First, Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony (as understood and elaborated by the strain of British Cultural Studies associated with the work of Stuart Hall) corresponds closely to that of dominant codes as determined by the engines of cultural production (including the formal state apparatus and economic institutions, but especially sites inhabited by “intellectuals” — schools, universities, religious and civic associations, popular culture and news media). And just as *articulations* (Hall 1985) between material conditions, political alignments and public policies, elements of media discourse, and fragments of popular common sense are neither historically nor logically necessary, so too in semiotics are the relationships between signifier and signified, as well as the nature of particular connotative connections among specific signs. In other words, the chains of conceptual association that link meanings to each other and to particular sets of signifiers are socially and politically constructed, much as are the articulations that connect fragments of common sense to each other, to the information and

discourse that people encounter in mass media, and to the material conditions that they experience.<sup>18</sup> Finally, the articulations among particular signs as manifest within a political text (e.g. a news report or a presidential speech) have effectivity at the mass psychological level not so much because of their formal logical connections (much less their resemblance to an objective truth), but because words and images — and their placement in relation to each other — have meaning within commonly (though never universally) accepted, yet historically variable, connotative codes.

Barthes himself deploys the concept of “myth” as an analog to dominant articulations of popular common sense: here, myth does not refer to a story that is simply false, but rather to a systematically partial rendering of reality that is constructed to serve existing power arrangements. Myths are explanations of the social world (concerning, e.g., the role of government in market economies, criteria determining the “deserving” and “undeserving” poor etc.). Like hegemonic formulations of common sense, myths eternalize and naturalize the contingencies of history (Barthes 1972 [1957]: 142-3): as Barthes put it in one of his most famous phrases, myth “is the privation of history” (ibid: 151) (or “depoliticized speech” [ibid: 142] — i.e. discourse whose roots in power relations are obscured).<sup>19</sup> Myth serves to excuse “the irresponsibility of man” — in other words, it legitimates the denial that political-economic relations are products of social agency, rather than natural or divine laws (ibid: 151). Barthes labels one of his key figures of myth

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<sup>18</sup> In line with this understanding, the arrangements of “considerations” into cognitively and affectively linked nodes that social scientific researchers have theorized on the psychological plane [Taber 2003: 442-46]) are structured through *associations* that (while they have a kind of *internal* logic when they are articulated effectively) are predicated on culturally produced codes of meaning inscribed in popular consciousness through social experience (including engagement with mass media and political discourse).

<sup>19</sup> “Truth to tell, what is invested in the concept is less reality than *a certain knowledge of reality*...it is a formless, unstable, nebulous condensation, *whose unity and coherence are above all due to its function*.” (Barthes 1972 [1957]: 119, emphasize added) By “function,” Barthes does not imply a preordained role in some naturally or divinely ordered mechanism, but rather a socially and politically constructed role in cultivating understandings that legitimate dominant power relations: in other words, the logic of myth (or cultural hegemony) is always a partial and internal one, which is grounded in its “usefulness” for propping up social-political-economic orders.



“inoculation” (ibid: 150): this refers to the admittance into public discourse and social practice of some (often individualized and localized) dissidence or dissonance, which serves to “immunize” dominant forces against more fundamental challenges.<sup>20</sup> This concept bears close correspondences with neo-Gramscian understandings of hegemony as providing space for opposition and resistance — and always acknowledging some imperfection in dominant systems — yet limiting and containing political challenges in order to forestall more fundamental critiques.<sup>21</sup>

In addition to holding these particular conceptual connections with neo-Gramscian theory, the species of semiotic analysis that I deploy differs from others in that it emphasizes the *material* dimensions and implications of communication. Certain approaches to semiotics — and to qualitative textual analysis in general — arguably exhibit a discursive reductionism that does not sit well with neo-Gramscian analytics, critical-realist epistemology or empirical studies of politics in general (see Clarke 1991: 20-41; Sayer 2010 [1984]: 276-77, n. 72). While approaches to semiotic analysis that followed Barthes’ seminal work certainly are concerned with the internal structures and logics of texts, they are equally concerned with the concrete forces that shape both the production and reception of discourse: close textual analyses are the central technique in this methodology, but the words and images in news stories, political speeches, advertisements and so forth are important principally because of what they tell us about these social-political-economic forces. Moreover, critical semiotics in this tradition is

<sup>20</sup> In Barthes’ (1972 [1957]: 150) perhaps hyperbolic phrasing, inoculation “consists in admitting the accidental evil of a class-bound institution the better to conceal its principal evil. One immunizes the contents of the collective imagination by means of a small inoculation of acknowledged evil; one thus protects it against the risk of a generalized subversion.”

<sup>21</sup> Barthes’s discussion of “inoculation” and the “privation of history” in myth also show striking parallels with certain contemporary theorizations and empirical treatments of U.S. media that I discuss in my case studies. These include Bennett’s (1993b) journalistic norm of “presumed democracy,” under which policy challenges are usually limited to those emanating from established institutional sources, and his and other scholars’ work on the “personalization” (Bennett 2009 [1983]) and “episodic” focus (e.g. Iyengar 1991) that characterizes mainstream news coverage, where wrongdoing attributed to particular political and corporate elites is emphasized over historically contextualized coverage of institutional and structural dimensions of oppression or injustice. Indeed (like Gramsci), Barthes (1971 [1957]: 150) called for studies of media to explore the effects of dominant discourses: “The social geography of myths will remain difficult to trace as long as we lack an analytical sociology of the press.”

attendant to audiences' capacities to work from their predispositions to challenge or reject dominant interpretations (in Stuart Hall's terms, to spin "negotiated" or even "resistant" readings). At the same time, these approaches reject the hyper-aestheticized and extremely decentered perspectives associated with some forms of postmodernism, which not only can reduce social phenomena to pure discourse, but at their limit define out of existence concentrated political-economic power (Turner 2003 [1990]: 181-9; Clarke 1991). Thus, semiotics in a neo-Gramscian framework has a uniquely *political* orientation that foregrounds dominant arrangements and the forces that struggle against them: the overriding goal is to "use (such) texts as the site for examining the wider structures that produced them — those of the culture itself" in order to "understand the ways in which power relations are regulated, distributed and deployed" (Turner 2003 [1990]: 17).

This leads, finally, to the crucial role of normative evaluation in my project. As I explain in the last chapter, critical realism understands social science to include not only theoretical-empirical description and explanation, but also social critique that is unavoidably bound up with that scientific analysis. In contrast, the direct or tacit epistemological orientations associated with conventional approaches to media and public opinion make most empirical researchers in this tradition at best uncomfortable with — and at worst hostile to — explicit critique. Worried that charges of bias could undermine a certain kind of scientific legitimacy that is associated with analytic neutrality or objectivity, most scholars in this paradigm prefer either to discuss the normative dimensions of their empirical findings briefly and cautiously (often only in the final chapters of books or the concluding sections of journal articles), or else to ignore these dimensions altogether.

In the context of a project like mine, which is concerned with understanding how mainstream media coverage of public policy might affect the capacities, opportunities and

constraints that shape popular democratic action, this hesitancy creates serious analytical liabilities. Conventional social scientific thinking seems to suggest that — to use Page and Shapiro’s (1992) terminology — “the best available information and analysis” during debate over the Reagan economic plan would be messages grounded in supply-side economic theory for the administration and its allies, on the one hand, and those based on Keynesian theory for mainstream Democratic elites and their allies, on the other.<sup>22</sup> Or, for conservative forces the “best available information and analysis” would include data showing that under the Reagan plan, people in each income tax bracket would have their rates reduced by an equal 10 percent in the first year, thus showing the initiative’s fundamental fairness. Conversely, opponents would counter that the “best available information and analysis” comprises data showing that the tax plan — and its accompanying cuts in social welfare programs — would add proportionally more to the disposable income of more affluent citizens than it would to less affluent, thus making the policy initiative fundamentally unfair and class-biased. Moreover, even before this task of evaluation could be confronted, strict positivists would despair at the thought of cataloging the “available” information and analysis, and then comparing it to mass media coverage according to acceptable standards of evidence in this paradigm. In other words — again using Page and Shapiro’s (1992) language — “one person’s ‘education’ is another’s ‘manipulation’ and vice versa,” and the neutral scholar, committed to empiricism and standing outside ideology (at least in his or her professional role), is in no position to suggest otherwise: such questions are not appropriate for empirical social science. This view makes it difficult to use concrete evidence to

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<sup>22</sup> And, presumably, the “best available information and analysis” for a left-radical policy critic would be that grounded in critical theories based on historical materialism.

systematically confront how the ideological diversity of news coverage might impact democracy by shaping popular preferences and perceptions.<sup>23</sup>

However, these perspectives are grounded in questionable epistemological assumptions that set up unnecessary roadblocks to critically oriented yet empirically rigorous analysis. According to the critical-realist perspective, there are no final or strictly incontestable truths, and no immutable and universal laws of society or politics. However, it is both possible and desirable to use quantitative and qualitative techniques to gather and assess evidence that is subject to confirmation or refutation according to standards of empirical comprehensiveness and argumentative cogency within bounded contexts. Thus, applying a concept like “best available information and analysis” to a mass-mediated policy debate is not a promising strategy from the perspective of positivist and empiricist notions of science, but it can be reformulated and empirically applied from a broader analytical position.

It is neither necessary nor possible to show that one has identified an exhaustive set of frames and has mathematically calculated the appropriate proportion of each of these kinds of messages that should appear in a hypothetically and ideally “fair” and “balanced” news environment. Rather, the crucial task is to identify communications artifacts from a wide range of relevant voices in particular policy debates (political parties, think tanks, interest groups and social movement organizations), situate in historical context the ideological perspectives that these voices represented and catalogue the messages they propagated. This evidence — partial though it must be — can nevertheless serve as a

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<sup>23</sup> In this sense, positivist approaches to media analysis and certain postmodern perspectives on political discourse are oddly similar (though they arrive at their commonalities by very different routes): both eschew strong social critique because of commitments to ontological-epistemological stances that (each in its own way) fail to recognize the possible existence of empirically grounded leverage on which to build such critique. Put crudely, positivist perspectives can speak in terms of “correct” or “incorrect,” but usually only within narrowly empiricist and scientific parameters; postmodern approaches escape these ontological-epistemological boundaries, but often do so at the cost of jettisoning discussions of “better” or “worse.”

rigorous empirical rendering of the available frames that might plausibly have been circulated by news outlets: thus, one can present many of the available — though not necessarily availed of — ways that policy discourse might have been formulated in news coverage during particular historical episodes. One must then construct a persuasive, empirically grounded argument about the extent to which mass media coverage reflected or refracted these frames (and, thus, the social-political-economic interests that voiced them).

This is precisely what the critical-semiotic approach that I deploy in Chapters 5 and 7 (as combined with the quantitative media analyses in Chapters 4 and 6) is poised to do: I critique the content of the news according to neo-Gramscian understandings of popular-democratic discourse that point toward an enlargement of human freedom — i.e. the leveling of communicative power, the erosion of barriers between the “leaders” and “led,” and the cultivation of mass critical consciousness and collective political agency — demonstrating how media coverage stunted these possibilities through ideological operations in the negative register. I argue that a news environment featuring a decided tilt toward neoliberal-New Right political voices, policy tools and social visions — nested within an overarching statist, elite-centered narrative of personalized, strategic gamesmanship where citizens are positioned as largely powerless — does not constitute “the best available information and analysis,” *when* it is embedded in an empirical-historical context that features other voices, policy tools and visions that were rarely included, negatively depicted or outright ignored.

One might wish to avoid the conspiratorially colored, instrumentalist and overly individualistic language of potential “elite manipulation” to describe such discursive conditions, but one could term such a mass communication environment strongly *hegemonic*: it would comprise a limited, constricted and distorted range of discourse presented to mass

audiences according to systematic patterns that privileged neoliberal-New Right interpretations, the social-material forces implicated in these and elitist models of politics in general.<sup>24</sup> To the extent that these circumstances and their effects are shown through careful, theoretically informed empirical analysis to be contingent, one is on firm ground to explore the emancipatory possibilities that may be held by different patterns of discourse and new systems of communication that could help generate more fully democratic social relations: as neo-Gramscian theory contends, critical evaluation must proceed in relational fashion on the concrete (i.e., empirically specified) grounds of history, rather than in reference to abstract, idealist standards.

### **V. Survey Experiment: Probing Psychological Mechanisms at the Intersection of Media Hegemony and Popular Common Sense**

I end my study with a stage of empirical analysis that may seem oddly suited to a post-positivist conception of science informed by critical-cultural theories of communication: an experiment relying almost exclusively on quantitative methods. However, seen through the wide-angle epistemological lens of critical realism, this kind of experiment is a powerful instrument for explaining — and critiquing — the connections between mass media coverage, hegemonic articulations of common sense and expressions of popular consent for the neoliberal-New Right turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy. I describe the design of this experiment more fully in Chapter 8. Here, I briefly address its role in the broader epistemological and theoretical architecture of my project.

Qualitative analyses of political discourse and popular consciousness guided by the compelling conceptual and practical impulses of critical theory suffer when they fail to

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<sup>24</sup> Of course, as I discuss at length in Chapter 2, in the positive ideological dimension, these hegemonic understandings drew on culturally resonant elements of popular common sense, so they were both *destructive* of alternative (and potentially emancipatory) visions, and *constructive* of dominant social visions.

demonstrate that the phenomena they identify and explore have real effectivity in animating concrete and consequential political action (e.g., electoral behavior, policy opinion or social protest activity). Sometimes, scholars simply assume that the discourse they analyze in news stories or advertisements shapes (or is shaped by) popular attitudes, perceptions and behaviors, without empirically studying concrete audience reactions at all. Other times, scholars produce valuable accounts of mass social and political thinking based on interactive small-group conversations and unstructured interviews, but their findings may be taken less seriously than they otherwise would because they fail to show how their evidence might generalize to larger populations, or to account for how the thoughts their participants express may affect phenomena that proximately drive public policy, such as partisan mobilization, voting behavior, opinion polls and movement activism.

I attempt to avoid these shortcomings by designing a media experiment that explores to what extent — and through what mechanisms observable at the individual level — the kinds of hegemonic news discourse which characterized the policy episodes in my case studies may actually shape poll results. From my perspective, the dynamics of polling and survey response ultimately are worth studying not because they represent some kind of privileged or objective window into “what the public wants,” but because they play important roles in actual political and policy debates that have crucial material consequences. People confront political discourse (whether at a protest rally, in a discussion at the corner tavern or on their living room TV set) at the level of psychology — i.e., through individual cognition and emotion. And there is a large and growing research literature on how mental structures and habits shape the complex processes by which people translate messages gleaned from their environment into survey responses. Those who are concerned with how

hegemonic patterns of media coverage legitimate dominant power relations *in practice* cannot afford to ignore this research or the methods that can give us access to its insights.

My experiment leverages the benefits of relative environmental control and random assignment to explore how actual people may respond to patterns of hegemonic discourse as manifest within actual news stories. Because of the care I took in designing the experiment with close attention both to the theoretical framework that animates my study, and to the concrete evidence I collect through my case studies, this phase of my analysis serves as a valuable analytical tool for understanding the generation of mass consent for neoliberal-New Right economic and social welfare policy. While Sayer (2010 [1984]) rarely mentions experiments as a method — except to occasionally caution against approaches that suggest we can do controlled studies of social phenomena fully in the mold of natural science — the kind of experiment I present in Chapter 8 is entirely consistent with the logic and aims of critical realism.

Without using the term, Sayer (2010 [1984]: 249) describes the virtues of what mainstream social scientists call “natural experiments:”

Rare conjunctures...may lay bare structures and mechanisms which are normally hidden. In other words, precisely because of the contingent nature of concrete conjunctures it is sometimes possible to find situations where certain contingencies are actually ‘held off’ spontaneously. This allows us to make comparisons with abstract theoretical accounts in which the contingencies are only ‘held off’ in thought experiments.

I take this a step further by consciously intervening in the processes by which people engage with media messages and answer survey questions. In effect, in my case studies I demonstrate that hegemonic media environments (at least within the bounded historical context I study) have “causal powers” that may or may not be activated under particular conditions. My empirical evidence and my theoretical logic suggests that these causal powers did, in fact, operate during the historical episodes constituting debate over the 1981 Reagan



economic plan and the 1995-1996 welfare reform initiative. But because of the complex and variable configuration of social phenomena that were potentially at work in these cases, I cannot demonstrate with a strong degree of confidence that hegemonic mass media coverage caused the poll results I describe. Through the experiment, however, I am able to make much stronger claims about the individual-level conditions under which — and the mechanisms through — the causal powers that exist in mainstream news coverage may actually be activated.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps most importantly from the perspective of a critical approach to social science, I argue that experiments are an under-utilized tool for demonstrating how the circumstances that legitimate dominant power arrangements and impede emancipation *could be different*:

It would be a poor abstract or concrete research which was unaware of the fact that what *is* need not necessarily be, and which failed to note that people have powers which remain unactivated in the society in question but which *could* be activated. And...these possibilities are grounded in the nature of the present in terms of what we are now (Sayer 2010 [1984]: 256-7).

In demonstrating scientifically that public opinion toward neoliberal-New Right economic and social welfare policy would likely be much less supportive if major news media changed their patterns of coverage to be even moderately more ideologically expansive and substantively diverse, we can glimpse how the political-economic history of the last 30 years could have been significantly different. And we can understand something about how ordinary people's power of political voice — if activated by new patterns and systems of

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<sup>25</sup> Of course, as I discuss in Chapter 8, while my experiment was constructed to be unusually realistic, we must always take care not to claim too much from methods that abstract from the complexities of society and politics. As Gilens (2002: 249) put it: "For all its power, the survey experiment is not a 'window' into the 'truth' in any simple sense. Any given survey experiment provides a single lens through which to observe the object of our interest. If our experiments are well designed, that lens may reveal otherwise hidden aspects of our respondents' thinking. But most of the time the complexities of human attitudes are too elusive to be captured with a single tool, experimental or otherwise."

mass communication — might inform social struggles to make the history that is yet to be experienced considerably more democratic and egalitarian.

## Chapter 4 -- “Gipper Sweeps Congress:”

### Mass Media and the Launch of the Reagan Revolution

#### I. Introduction

On April 15, 1981 — tax day, as it happened — *ABC World News Tonight* wrapped up its story on the historic Reagan economic plan with two sentences reporting on an unnamed group of activists who had attached themselves to a tour party and splattered blood on three White House columns. The protesters were opposing a policy initiative that included plans to slash upper-income taxes, make deep cuts in social welfare and business regulatory programs, offer corporate tax breaks aimed at spurring capital investment, and drastically hike military spending.

“The blood was quickly removed, and the demonstrators quickly arrested,” deadpanned correspondent Susan King at the close of the report.

Those who read newspapers that chose to pick up a 235-word Associated Press wire story learned that these 10 protesters — again anonymous — had carried the blood in baby bottles (presumably to emphasize the impact of the economic plan on infants, although the report included no quotes from activists or their representatives and no mention of their substantive positions or organizational affiliations) — and that, according to Deputy White House Press Secretary Larry Speakes, they were “not regarded as threats.” In addition to the bottles, protesters threw federal tax forms at the pillars, and then “got down on their knees and started singing,” according to a National Park Service employee who was working the grounds that day. The AP ended its dispatch with: “It was not known if President Reagan, recuperating (from the recent assassination attempt) upstairs in the White House living quarters, was aware of the protest.”

These two reports vividly capture the U.S. mainstream news media's typical treatment of demonstrators and activist groups generally, and its representation of such political actors during debate over Reagan's inaugural economic program in particular. This initiative, which included the largest federal tax cut to date and the largest federal spending decrease in history, was the first major domestic policy move in an ideological shift that has tilted public discourse and governmental agendas in directions decidedly favorable to neoliberal global financial and economic arrangements, and has catapulted the New Right from the margins of political relevance and acceptability to the highest echelons of institutional power (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Phillips 1990; Meeropol 1998; Harvey 2005; Frank 2008). Despite the clear gravity of the socioeconomic issues involved in debate over the Reagan economic plan, on the rare occasions when mass media mentioned nongovernmental political activists, they were generally represented in episodic, acontextual form. The focus was on their (occasionally dramatic) behavior — and whether they put Reagan in physical danger — rather than on their substantive ideas, and overall, the news gave government officials a near-monopoly platform to relay their perspectives.<sup>1</sup> As Wittebols (1996: 358) argues, in the U.S. mainstream media social protest is almost always depicted as a “sideshow” embedded within a larger elite-centered narrative that marginalizes non-official actors and viewpoints: “A focus on the quirky or odd nature of protest relegates

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<sup>1</sup> For example, in a July 7, 1981, AP story on the president's speech at a GOP fund-raising event, headlined “Reagan Turns Up Heat on Tax Cut,” the presence of some 5,000 protesters outside the hall was briefly noted in the 12<sup>th</sup> paragraph. Readers learned in the next paragraph that police arrested some activists inside the venue for “creating a disturbance.” The only substantive information on the protesters' positions came in the 14<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the 991-word story, where they were paraphrased as claiming that the administration's budget reductions “will hurt working people, the handicapped, students and the poor.” The story included no quotes from activists, and the remainder of the piece was dominated by Reagan's florid comments to Republican partisans. And in a July 30, 1981, AP report headlined “Tax, Budget Victories Provide 'Economic Plan for the Future,' Reagan Says,” just six of 24 paragraphs were devoted to protests outside the president's speaking engagement. One of these paragraphs concerned potential security concerns; a statement from the Rev. Joseph Lowery, national president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, was the only one attributed to activists: “I think we have to let the administration and the nation know there's growing discontent among the people. We must let them know that just because the Democrats in Congress have capitulated, that doesn't mean the people in this country have capitulated,” he said. “We refuse to sell out to jelly beans and cuff links.”

it to amusement or ridicule. At best, protest scenes are usually the backdrop or ‘props’ for introducing a debate that reflects elite, as opposed to grass-roots, perspectives.”

This chapter employs quantitative analysis to sketch the contours of political discussion in mainstream news coverage of the Reagan economic plan, and it situates opinion poll results signaling public support for the plan in this mass communications context. The case is crucial because it was the opening move in the contemporary rightward turn in national domestic policy — the 1981 tax and domestic budget cuts set a policy trajectory that has significantly altered the American political economy to comply with the emerging neoliberal order. This episode is also important because its patterns of media coverage and political rhetoric were instrumental in setting the terms of discussion and constructing the communicative field of policy contestation for the ascendant New Right hegemony. In this chapter, I show how frequently particular voices and ideological frames appeared in news coverage of the 1981 economic plan, and how often certain key pieces of policy information were circulated. This lays the groundwork for my critical semiotic interpretation of the discursive articulations in media coverage and political rhetoric in the Reagan case, presented in Chapter 5. There, I analyze the meaning of mass communication patterns by situating them historically in cultural, social and political context, and exploring in detail how they might have been effective in shaping public consent for the right turn.

My empirical findings in this chapter depict a mainstream news landscape in which a largely non-substantive spectacle of elite-centered strategic conflict framed a policy narrative tilted decidedly toward the conservative voices and views of the New Right. I describe this media environment based on unusually detailed and comprehensive quantitative analyses of more than 400 news reports, including every evening network television story on the issue that aired in the eight months leading up to the president’s

signing of the tax plan. My evidence suggests that news coverage had two related ideological implications for mass legitimation through public opinion polls of the right wing-populist themes and policies undergirding the New Right agenda:

1) Media's consistent focus on procedural machinations, strategy and tactics implicitly endorsed an elitist vision of politics that positions news audiences as passive spectators of a game whose larger material and social stakes are marginalized or obscured. This dynamic symbolically disempowers and disables ordinary citizens as social actors, perhaps fueling the popular cynicism and disengagement that has reinforced the class biases of American political power under neoliberalism.

2) To the extent that media engaged policy substance (e.g., the design and potential socioeconomic effects of the tax and budget plans, which interests would likely gain material resources and long-term political power — and which would lose), sources and frames favorable to the emerging conservative coalition carried the discourse. Mass media's bent toward explicitly ideological messages that endorsed private markets and demonized the welfare state placed right-of-center forces in an advantageous position for securing a measure of popular consent by shaping poll responses — a key task, in our historical context, in winning Gramsci's "war of position."

I show that news media during this policy episode rarely included sources and perspectives from outside official government circles. And even those elite voices that questioned or opposed aspects of the Reagan economic plan — mostly Democratic elected officials, tagged by Budget Director David Stockman as "the liberal remnant" (Greider 1982: 13) — were significantly outnumbered by New Right sources and perspectives: broadly

conservative voices — especially those from the administration — outpaced all others in news coverage, while the two most prominent substantive representations were those opposing federal social and business regulatory programs, and those claiming that tax cuts like the Reagan program would spark the national economy. And, as I explain more fully in the next chapter, almost all the oppositional messages that did appear in mass media coverage during this episode shared certain key assumptions with New Right understandings, which presented obstacles to their effectiveness in undermining public support for the Reagan agenda. Both these dynamics— the presentation of an elite-centered strategic spectacle and the explicitly rightward ideological tilt — were ultimately favorable to the business-friendly conservative populism championed by the New Right at this key historical moment. As neo-Gramscian perspectives on mass communications hegemony suggest, the news did circulate certain oppositional frames in substantial numbers. But these messages of New Deal “embedded liberalism” (Harvey 2005: 11-12) appeared in significantly lower frequencies, and almost always as voiced by official sources whose willingness or capacity to present strong critiques of the New Right agenda were limited.

My analyses in this chapter and the next suggests that we can understand mainstream media’s selection of sources and views in a way that recognizes its role as a hegemonic social mechanism that filters the discourse presented to mass publics in ways that support dominant power structures and associated policy regimes, while also acknowledging the significant — though limited — space for criticism and opposition. In short, news media during government policymaking episodes is a formidable gatekeeper in the processes by which popular common sense is constructed and selectively reinforced to favor dominant social forces. However, because hegemony is never airtight or monolithic, the communications platform for opposition nevertheless is real and has the potential to help

generate critique of the cultural and material premises of American politics. My evidence on the fabric of news coverage during debate over the 1981 tax and budget plans suggests that “the consent of the governed” — far from being an exogenous force smoothly exerting the people’s democratic will on the state apparatus — is deeply implicated in the web of hegemonic news that circulates political debate. Before presenting that evidence, however, I outline the concrete shape of the Reagan economic plan.

## II. Policy Background: Supply-Side Tax Reduction and Welfare State Rollback

President Reagan’s signature Economic Recovery Tax Act of 1981 was at the time the largest federal tax reduction in American history, with an estimated cost of \$750 billion over five years. The administration’s original proposal called for a 33 percent cut in personal income tax rates over three years (including reducing the top marginal nominal rate from 70 percent to 50 percent), along with cuts in the capital gains rate (including reducing the top marginal statutory rate from 28 percent to 20 percent), large reductions in estate and gift taxes, incentives for private retirement savings, an accelerated capital depreciation schedule for business assets such as plants and equipment, and expanded corporate investment credits. After compromise with deficit-leery members of Congress, the personal tax rate reductions were shaved to 25 percent over three years, but the bulk of the program as the White House proposed it was enacted and signed in August 1981 (Steuerle 1992: 39-56; Meeropol 1998: 79-81; Baker 2007: 65-8; CQ Researcher 1982).<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, the personal income tax reductions — though proportional (or “across the board”), in the sense that the percentage rate decrease was the same for all income levels

<sup>2</sup> A nonpartisan research organization asserted that the administration “achieved at least 90 percent of its initial objectives” in the tax bill (Tax Foundation 1981: 2). Several provisions were added to the legislation in Congress — mostly in a bid to attract conservative Southern Democratic support — including easing the so-called “marriage penalty” on two-earner households and reducing taxation of income earned abroad. Most of these changes, while not offered as part of the original Reagan bill, were supported by the administration and its New Right allies, and had been publicly advocated as parts of future policy proposals.



— were projected at the time (and evaluated in subsequent analyses) to heavily favor affluent and wealthy people. In 1980, the median income for a family of four was \$25,400 (Tax Foundation 1981: 6). By 1984, those with incomes of \$30,000 and up would reap more than 63 percent of the total income tax cuts, those making \$50,000 or more would get about one-third of the total cuts, and those with incomes of \$100,000-plus would receive more than 13 percent of the cuts, according to the nonpartisan Tax Foundation (*ibid*: 7).<sup>3</sup>

Among the provisions not initially advocated by the Reagan administration but added later by Congress was the indexation of income tax rates and deductions for inflation after 1984. Much of the perceived mass political demand for the Reagan tax agenda — during the 1980 presidential campaign, during the 1981 policy debate, and in political commentary and later scholarly analyses — has been attributed to “bracket creep,” or the impact of steep inflation during the 1970s pushing those of modest means into higher tax brackets (Morgan 2007: 33). But ending bracket creep, thus easing the federal tax obligations of low- and middle-income workers (and, arguably, increasing their incentives to earn more), could have been accomplished much more directly, effectively and equitably simply through an indexing provision, with no statutory rate reductions for high-income people, and no easing of estate or gift taxes (Tax Foundation 1981: 11-13; Steuerle 1992: 43-4). In any case, the overall rise in tax responsibilities from 1945 through 1980 is almost completely attributable to increases in federal payroll (i.e. Social Security and Medicare) taxes and in state or local taxes, which were not affected by the 1981 Reagan plan (Morgan 2007: Figure 2.2 on p. 34). Unlike personal and corporate income taxes and estate taxes, payroll and state

<sup>3</sup> As a point of comparison in light of inflation, \$50,000 in 1981 was equivalent to more than \$118,000 in 2010, while \$100,000 was equivalent to about \$237,000. For the effect of the Reagan tax plan on nominal income tax rates for people in different income brackets over the three years of the program, see Table 5 in Meeropol (1998: 80).

or local sales and consumption taxes are regressive, falling more heavily lower- and middle-income than on upper-income people.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, while the effects of the business tax reductions in the bill were complex, a former Reagan and George H.W. Bush administration Treasury Department official argues that the accelerated capital depreciation schedule actually harmed new and struggling small businesses (Steuerle 1992: 47). As will be seen more clearly in the next chapter, these effects contradict much Reagan and New Right rhetoric, which stressed the need to incentivize small-scale entrepreneurship. In addition, the 1981 changes in business provisions promoted what Steuerle (1992: 48-52) termed a “tax shelter bonanza” by encouraging complex tax-avoidance arrangements by individuals and corporations with the means to hire accountants and lawyers.<sup>5</sup>

Publicly, the basic rationale for the Reagan tax plan was grounded in a logic developed by a group of “supply-side” economists during the 1970s whose ideas had until recently been marginalized in mainstream academic and elite policymaking discourse.<sup>6</sup> The central proposition (as I noted in Chapter 2, Section VII), was that drastic reductions in marginal income tax rates — especially in upper-income brackets, and in particular, the top rate — would spur economic expansion by offering incentives for private savings, capital investment and labor earnings. Coupled with this was the drive to liberalize depreciation allowances for physical infrastructure like plants and equipment, which would give businesses incentives to modernize and expand hiring. Moreover, such cuts would boost economic growth to the extent that overall tax revenues would increase dramatically, thus

<sup>4</sup> Responding to losses in federal aid mandated by the Reagan budget, “in 1981, five states increased sales taxes, 22 states increased gasoline taxes, and six states increased cigarette taxes.” At the same time, most states’ income tax frameworks were statutorily linked to the federal code, so the large, regressive federal cut automatically reduced state income tax rates in a similar way (CQ Researcher 1982: 4).

<sup>5</sup> See also CQ Researcher (1982: 7) on the regressive tax expenditures expanded or added in the 1981 bill.

<sup>6</sup> Prominent theorists included George Gilder and Arthur Laffer, developer of the “Laffer Curve.”

reducing and eventually eliminating budget deficits.<sup>7</sup> The immediate origins of the Reagan plan may be found in the 1978 Kemp-Roth tax initiative, which attracted tepid legislative support at the time but which soon proved an ideological harbinger of the neoliberal-New Right policy turn (Meeropol 1998: 79). As Steuerle (1992: 40) notes, supply-side theory has close conceptual connections to older ideas that only a regressive “head tax” — i.e. a system in which each person pays exactly the same amount of tax, regardless of wealth or earnings — results in an optimally efficient allocation of resources on a society-wide basis.

Differences and similarities between supply-side theory and long-running conservative doctrine that tax cuts for the wealthiest segments of society are in the economic interests of all — derisively termed “trickle-down economics” — are contested. But Stockman told journalist William Greider after the tax plan was enacted in 1981 that sophisticated supply-side concepts had been deployed as a means to “sell” upper-bracket tax reduction: “Kemp-Roth was always a Trojan horse to bring down the top rate,” he said (Greider 1982: 49; see also 49-50).<sup>8</sup>

The Reagan administration’s fiscal 1982 budget proposal — which, in its major outlines, received congressional approval in the Omnibus Budget Reconciliation Act of 1981 — featured significant reductions in a host of social welfare and business regulatory programs, along with a \$20 billion increase in Pentagon spending, which ultimately led to what has been described as the largest peacetime military buildup in U.S. history. At the behest of some Republicans and conservative Southern Democrats, the ultimate budget blueprint included even larger total domestic spending cuts than the administration had

<sup>7</sup> As Greider (1982: 95) described it, supply-side doctrine “promised a fundamental redirection of the national economy, without pain or dislocation.” Or, as Stockman put it, “whenever there are great strains or changes in the economic system, it tends to generate crackpot theories, which then find their way into the legislative channels.” (ibid: 66)

<sup>8</sup> In an odd journalistic arrangement, Stockman had agreed to be interviewed by *Washington Post* reporter Greider over several months in 1981 largely as a “background” source even as debate over the Reagan program was proceeding. When his comments were published in an *Atlantic* magazine article (and later in a book), a brief but intense controversy ensued because of his candid depiction of chaotic policymaking, dubious fiscal rationales and deceptive rhetoric. Reagan refused Stockman’s resignation as OMB director in November 1981.

publicly advocated, and constituted the biggest reduction in projected federal spending in U.S. history (Ferguson and Rogers 1986: 127-30; Meeropol 1998: 81-98; Baker 2007: 74-5). Eligibility rules were tightened and benefit allocations were cut for cash welfare (called Aid to Families with Dependent Children at the time), food stamps, child nutrition, Medicaid, foster care and child care programs, Social Security Disability Income, subsidized housing, low-income fuel assistance, higher education grants, and unemployment assistance. There were also key reductions in aid for workers laid off because of falling global trade barriers, benefits for occupationally impaired miners, community service employment programs, aid to state and municipal governments, and funding for regulatory enforcement in environmental protection and civil rights, in addition to a number of other industry-backed provisions (such as a loosening of broadcast ownership rules, a policy direction that was consummated on a grander scale by the Clinton administration in the Telecommunications Act of 1996).<sup>9</sup> This broad budget pattern continued through Reagan's first term; the major factor behind the administration's "failure" to reduce the total size and cost of the federal government during its eight years in office was its drastic acceleration of the trend toward increased military spending begun during the late Carter years, which is a goal entirely in line with mainline New Right policy ideas and consistent with neoliberal theory on the role of the state (Greider 1982; Phillips 1990; Harvey 2005; Baker 2007; CQ Researcher 1982).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> At the same time, certain reductions in specific programs proposed by the Reagan administration were softened or rejected by Congress. For example, legislators turned back the White House's attempt to cut the Supplemental Security Income program for the elderly poor, blind and disabled, deciding instead to increase these benefits. And the 1981 budget act failed to implement the White House's favored "workfare" requirement for AFDC recipients, with legislators deciding instead to begin allowing states to create such programs themselves. In part because of the political and administrative momentum created by the 1981 budget (Fording 2003), this latter policy came to fruition 15 years later when Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, which is the subject of my case study in Chapters 6 and 7.

<sup>10</sup> See Table 6 in Meeropol (1998: 90) for administration spending proposals and congressional enactments in major means-tested social programs through 1984.

In sum, the Reagan tax and budget plans of 1981 set a significant precedent in federal policy and its relationship to private markets.<sup>11</sup> These enactments paved the way for a series of moves throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s — many of them accomplished with significant, if uneven, bipartisan elite support — that further reconfigured the American political economy in line with neoliberal understandings and material imperatives. Reagan’s massive first-term tax cuts, social welfare and business regulatory program reductions, and military spending increases shifted the national policy agenda and the terms of public discourse decidedly to the right. Some effects were relatively direct and explicit, while others were subtle and longer-term, such as exacerbating fiscal and political pressures for further tax and domestic spending cuts that may have had self-reinforcing dimensions. Most importantly, the 1981 economic plan and the later policies it spawned shifted income and wealth (and, by extension, political power) upward in American society to a potentially unprecedented degree.

The story of how this occurred features a configuration of multiple, complexly interacting causes at the economic, social, cultural and political levels. Campaign finance, party strategy, interest group dynamics and other factors are all relevant to understanding the ascendance of the New Right as an ideological force in the changing landscape of economic and social welfare policy under neoliberalism. But the relationships among elite discourse, mainstream news coverage and mass opinion constitute a key dimension of the narrative that

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<sup>11</sup> A number of other administration-initiated or supported moves in 1981 and shortly thereafter were clearly in line with neoliberal economic and social welfare policy trends. Among these were: the continued tight monetary policy begun under Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul Volcker in 1979 that focused on aggressively attacking inflation by controlling the rate of growth in the money supply and avoiding interest rate reductions (Meeropol 1998: 70-78; Baker 2007: 73-4); a confrontational administrative and symbolic stance toward unions, including Reagan’s legal action against the striking federal air-traffic controllers, which had major ripple effects in labor-management relations throughout the economy (Harvey 2005: 52-3; Baker 2007: 68-71; Dollars and Sense 1981); failure to raise the minimum wage to keep up with inflation (Baker 2007: 73-4); and the scaling back of business regulation outside the budget process, including requiring agencies to conduct cost-benefit analyses of new rules, creating the vice president’s Task Force on Regulatory Relief, relaxing oversight through personnel appointments, and “repeal by non-enforcement,” which broke the trend of sharply increased industry regulation from 1970 through 1980 (Ferguson and Rogers 1986: 130-37; Phillips 1990: 91-101; Meeropol 1998: 81-6; Harvey 2005: 52).

has remained largely unexamined. I begin this exploration by turning to the broad shape of media coverage during debate over the Reagan economic agenda from January through August 1981. Whose voices did the public hear on television and read in newspapers during those crucial months in the shifting American political economy, and what, precisely, were they saying about taxes, the federal budget and politics more broadly?

### III. Content Analyses: Understanding the Spectacle of The Gipper vs. Tip

My evidence shows that mainstream media largely represented political discussion of Reagan's landmark first-term economic plan as a "spectacle" (Debord 2010 [1967]; Edelman 1988) in the form of a game centered on high-profile elite actors whose main concern was to win strategic advantage. Coverage was characterized by an essentially non-substantive narrative that did not frequently engage the principles or policy logics that might lay behind all this maneuvering, or the larger social stakes implicated in the debate. Thus, the hegemonic news media operated here in the *negative* ideological register to limit the range of sources almost entirely to government officials, and the range of messages largely to frames that were devoid of policy substance. Simultaneously, media worked in the *positive* ideological dimension by depicting a spectacle that captured key strands of American popular common sense that construct political elites as self-interested, petty in-fighters, yet look to these same officials to work for the common good without prodding from citizen activism or consistent public scrutiny.<sup>12</sup>

This strong emphasis on political gamesmanship, elite tactical maneuvering and internal governmental procedure — which, while especially prevalent on TV news, was also prominent in print coverage — can be seen in a pattern of evidence that comprises a

<sup>12</sup> As I explained in Chapter 2, neo-Gramscian conceptualizations define negative ideological operations as processes that limit or restrict the range of socio-political perspectives that mass publics engage with in popular cultural venues, such as the news media; positive ideological operations concern the circulation of perspectives that resonate with predispositional strands of popular common sense, including cultural narratives, stereotypes, images and bits of information.

number of content indicators. My story-level analysis of primary topical categories — seen in Figure 4-1 — shows that nearly half (48.5 percent) of television and newspaper reports focused primarily on procedural, strategic and/or tactical dimensions of the policy debate.<sup>13</sup> Thus, stories whose main themes centered on matters like the competing political strategies of the Reagan administration and the opposition congressional leadership, who was winning the “battle for public opinion” and whether the president would succeed in persuading conservative Southern Democrats to vote for his tax plan trumped those engaging the design and socioeconomic implications of White House initiatives and competing legislative alternatives.<sup>14</sup> To be sure, the total number of news reports that primarily focused on the substantive shape and socioeconomic consequences of tax and budget policy was slightly higher than those with a procedural, strategic or tactical bent. However, a media environment in which almost half the stories carries little or no content related to ideological principles or policy substance is a significant obstacle to the widening of mass political knowledge, consciousness and agency — and thus, effective democratic practice. While there have been many analyses of the related “horse-race” phenomenon in U.S. electoral news (e.g. Patterson 1994), there has been surprisingly little empirical research on the prevalence of such strategic themes in media depictions of public policy episodes. Such evidence as exists, however, is consistent with my own: Cappella and Jamieson (1997) found that 67 percent of news reports on the Clinton health care plan during 1993 and 1994 carried a primarily strategic focus, while Lawrence (2000) reported that 41 percent of stories on

<sup>13</sup> This graph depicts primary foci only. As I explained in Chapter 3, each story could have up to two foci (and I coded two for the vast majority of reports). Aggregating primary and secondary foci shows that 41.3 percent of the total foci in network TV and Associated Press reports on the Reagan plan were generally non-substantive.

<sup>14</sup> A February 19, 1981, dispatch from the AP — headlined “Sales Job on Reagan Budget Proposal Begins with TV Interview” — illustrates the flavor of this discourse: its lead stated, “now comes the hard part for the Reagan administration: Getting Congress to go along with the drastic spending and tax cuts the president prescribed for the ailing economy.” On the most generous interpretation, just four of the story’s 21 paragraphs included any engagement with policy substance. Moreover, the report carried no criticism of the administration’s economic plan.

welfare reform in a selection of major national newspapers and magazines during 1996 had a primary “game frame.”<sup>15</sup>

Further evidence for this non-substantive focus comes from my finding that official government voices — led by the Reagan administration — dominated news coverage of the 1981 policy debate. Figure 4-2 shows the total percentage of (named and unnamed) sources from different categories on network news and in the Associated Press across the period of my analysis. More than 88 percent of voices during this policy debate can be classified as “official” sources.<sup>16</sup> A majority of these were from the Reagan administration, including the president himself, but also prominently featuring White House chief of staff James Baker, Treasury Secretary Donald Regan and Budget Director Stockman. Leading the voices of Democratic officials was House Speaker Thomas P. “Tip” O’Neill Jr., followed by House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Dan Rostenkowski and House Majority Leader Jim Wright.<sup>17</sup> While much scholarship theorizes on and demonstrates the prevalence of elite sources in mainstream U.S. news coverage, my findings stand out for the magnitude of official dominance: no studies of domestic policy debates that I am aware of have documented a proportion of elite voices this large.

Most quantitative research on official vs. non-official sources in American news media focuses on foreign policy and national security issues. This emphasis seems to be based in part on a pluralist assumption (also prevalent in popular lore) that the range of ideological perspectives and voices must be wider in domestic contexts, since foreign policy

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<sup>15</sup> Coding approaches can have a large impact on quantitative results in this research area, so readers should be cautious in comparing study findings.

<sup>16</sup> Official sources were administration sources, Republican Party sources, Democratic Party sources, state/local government sources who did not carry a partisan identification and sources from the federal bureaucracy. Non-official sources were conservative or progressive interest group/social movement organization (SMO) sources, sources from research organizations or academia, and ordinary citizens.

<sup>17</sup> This pattern of official media dominance is even more stark (more than 90 percent of total sources) if we include experts from academia and non-governmental research organizations, many of whom in this case were economists tied to corporate interests, especially Wall Street firms and forecasting agencies.



episodes are characterized by tighter state control of information, appeals to patriotism and a firmer elite ideological consensus. However, the official source dominance that I demonstrate here is in line with the higher end in methodologically comparable studies of foreign policy coverage: Althaus et al. (1996) found that elite voices (U.S. and foreign) made up 89 percent of the total in *New York Times* coverage of the U.S.-Libya episode in 1985 and 1986. An analysis of the pre-invasion debate over the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003 showed that official sources (again, domestic and foreign) made up 79 percent of total voices on network TV (Hayes and Guardino 2010).

Non-governmental groups and social movement organizations of any ideological stripe were severely marginalized in news coverage of the 1981 economic plan: these voices made up just 6.5 percent of total sources on network TV and in AP reports. And several of the most frequently quoted NGOs — such as the National Conservative PAC and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce — are elite-centered organizations largely advocating the interests of private capital and upper-income people. My findings here confirm those of similar studies showing the marginalization of non-governmental groups in mass media coverage: using a coding scheme that probably overstated the frequency of non-official voices, Danielian and Page (1994) found that sources from non-governmental groups comprised just 14.4 percent of the total in network TV coverage of 80 separate foreign and domestic policy issues from 1969 through 1982 (at 36.5 percent, business organizations made up the largest proportion of this set).<sup>18</sup> A second stage of analysis revealed that the universe of approximately 750 AP

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<sup>18</sup> This study was based on coding abstracts of TV news reports — rather than full stories — and researchers conducted analyses by dividing each summary into segments attributed to different sources. Moreover, Danielian and Page (1994) included many issues — such as civil rights and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender affairs — for which the proportion of official sources is likely to be significantly lower than for economic, social welfare and foreign policy matters: for instance, their source distribution for tax policy stories showed an 83.1 percent share for elite voices, compared to just 11.1 percent for non-governmental groups. And the bulk of these authors' data is from a period (the 1970s) that many media analysts and scholars consider the modern high point for U.S. mainstream news skepticism of official authorities. For more quantitatively derived evidence showing that the largest and wealthiest non-governmental organizations tend to dominate mass media coverage of interest groups and SMOs, see Thrall (2006).

reports on the Reagan plan included just nine references to demonstrations or protests — all of them brief, largely non-substantive and generally negatively valenced. If formal nongovernmental groups were marginalized during the 1981 debate, then ordinary citizens were essentially invisible in mainstream media: these voices — ostensibly the champions and beneficiaries of the right-leaning populism represented in the Reagan policy agenda — made up just 0.3 percent of total sources. Moreover, *none* of the Associated Press reports in my large random sample (which comprised about one-third of all of AP stories on the issue) included a direct or indirect statement from an ordinary citizen.

My findings here square with Bennett's (1993b: 184) theorization that mainstream journalists follow a norm of "presumed democracy," whereby they believe that "democracy is working unless proven otherwise — meaning that officials represent the people, and the job of the press is to report to the people what their representatives are doing." This mindset privileges the spectacle of top-down politics, placing the power to set policy agendas and discursive parameters almost entirely in official sources, and ignoring the possibility that structural and institutional factors may make elections — and the relationships between elite actions and rhetoric, on the one hand, and citizen preferences and goals, on the other — considerably less straightforwardly democratic than they appear. As Lewis (2001: 201) puts it, "reporters are caught up in a set of professional ideologies that make it difficult to go beyond the confines of elite political frameworks and a set of broader ideologies that make it difficult to question the notion of representative democracy." The pluralist presuppositions that seem to underlie the paucity of studies on the prevalence of official voices in coverage of domestic policy debates suggest that these claims about mainstream journalists might apply in some measure to mainstream political communications scholars as well.

My quantitative framing analysis adds another piece of evidence for the overall narrative of elite political spectacle that was constructed in mass media coverage of the 1981 tax and budget plans. As I noted in the previous chapter, I built this indicator to determine specifically what the sources on network TV and in mainstream print news stories were telling audiences about these Reagan-New Right policy initiatives. Figure 4-3 graphs the percentage of each of 13 frame categories that appeared from Jan. 1 through Aug. 13, 1981. At 40 percent, non-substantive messages made up the largest category. As Bourdieu (1998: 4) writes, mainstream media outlets — believing (or claiming) that the public demands dramatic, entertaining and simple depictions of conflict — emphasize individualized elite battles and procedural definitions of winning or losing, rather than the practical or principled implications of policy issues:

They direct attention to the game and its players rather than to what is really at stake, because these are sources of their interest and expertise. They are more interested in the tactics of politics than in the substance, and more concerned with the political effects of speeches and politicians' maneuverings within the political field (in terms of coalitions, alliances, or individual conflicts) than with the meaning of these.

One potential outcome of this dynamic, as I argue below, is the confirmation and reinforcement of popular expectations and perceptions of politics as esoteric, occasionally emotionally compelling, but ultimately distasteful and meaningless for ordinary people.

This focus by news sources on procedure, political strategy and tactics at the expense of substance was augmented and amplified by journalists' own interjections of non-substantive frames. Reporters (and editors) — who, working through their professional routines and practices, select sources to draw upon in producing stories — also occasionally include unattributed statements that frame the issue they are reporting on. Of these unsourced frames that I coded in network TV news and AP coverage, non-substantive statements greatly outnumbered all others. Journalists presented 181 such frames during the

period of analysis, which made up more than 70 percent of all unattributed messages, dwarfing the second-largest category by a factor of more than nine to one.<sup>19</sup> While the overall number of unattributed journalistic frames was quite low (I coded a total of 258 in more than 400 news stories) — thus casting doubt on the power of this single element to shape public opinion as expressed in polls — the regular inclusion of these statements likely added to the overall picture of essentially non-substantive elite conflict (and consensus) presented to citizens: consistent with the code of objectivity inscribed in mainstream American media, reporters did not often include statements without attributing them to outside sources, but when they did so, journalists almost invariably emphasized governmental process, political strategy and tactics (often, as I illustrate in the next chapter, in war-, sports- or entertainment-themed language). Ultimately, then, I suggest that reporters tended to be complicit in the negative ideological operations that played out during the 1981 debate not so much by slipping into their stories directly “biased” policy frames, as by presenting interpretations that reinforced the largely non-substantive official spectacle that came through most strongly in the voices of political elites.

However, mainstream news coverage of the Reagan tax and budget plans operated not only in the negative ideological register — narrowing the range of sources and frames into an overarching story of internal official machination — but also in the *positive* ideological dimension. In other words, this elite-focused, non-substantive discourse appears to resonate with key strands of American popular common sense. According to survey evidence, citizens (perhaps increasingly) see political leaders as self-interested, calculating actors who are out-

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<sup>19</sup> I coded just the first three unattributed journalistic frames in each report — instead of the first 12, as I did for the source-frames — but most stories had three or fewer of these messages. The second-largest category of unsourced frame in evening TV news and AP coverage comprised messages stating or implying support for federal social welfare or business regulatory programs (7.8 percent), followed closely by a frame depicting the federal government as an overbearing force that stifles private economic freedom and opportunity by illegitimately taxing citizens and businesses (7 percent, labeled “financial autonomy” in Figure 4-3).

of-touch with the experiences of everyday people and obsessed with battles over personal and partisan advantage. An influential treatment of the subject argues that this popular vision of democracy uneasily co-exists with hopes for an equally elite-centered — yet common-spirited — politics in which disinterested policy experts govern from above in the national interest with little need for input from ordinary citizens (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Thus, the strategic spectacle of tax-and-budget-cutting as represented in mass media coverage during 1981 both resonated with and reinforced a culturally dominant conceptualization of politics-as-petty elite conflict, even as such coverage perhaps fueled dreams of some mode of public-spirited — yet equally elite-centered and non-participatory — governance.

One of the shortcomings of Hibbing and Theiss-Morse's (2002) provocative study is their failure to engage the politically and socially endogenous nature of public attitudes and preferences generally, as well as the role of media specifically: these scholars take as given survey evidence that seems to signal severely limited mass political consciousness and interest in collective participation. They then reason forward that their findings should compel scholars and political activists to curb their civic expectations. However, both neo-Gramscian critical analytics and social scientific media and political psychology theory suggest that such popular understandings and aspirations are deeply connected to the web of hegemonic representations that permeate society, including most centrally news media depictions of politics. My empirical evidence from the case of the Reagan economic plan shows that not only were ordinary citizens and non-governmental advocates rarely heard from in mainstream media, but coverage arguably gave audiences at-large little reason to care about the substantive outcome of the policy debates. If my findings on elite-focused procedural, strategic and tactical coverage generalize to other contemporary U.S. policy

cases, it should be no wonder that so many people see politics as boring (in the best case) or vulgar (in the worst).

Indeed, my content analyses illustrate that news media rarely offered certain pieces of basic, concrete factual information that could illuminate the design, and, thus, the probable practical impacts of the Reagan tax and budget cuts. I coded for inclusion of four kinds of information: 1) The relative percentages of direct financial benefits in the administration tax plan (or in similar legislative initiatives) that would go to various income groups. 2) Any numerical information on the business tax breaks included in the Reagan (or similar) plans (e.g. the total dollar-value of such benefits or the percentage of the tax bill devoted to them). 3) Any numerical information on the relative share of income that payroll (i.e. Medicare and Social Security) taxes vs. federal income taxes take up for families or individuals at various income levels. 4) Any information on the dollar-value of social welfare or business regulatory programs slated for reduction or elimination in the administration (or similar) economic plan(s).<sup>20</sup> While nearly one of every four stories in my analysis included at least one piece of information that fell into one of those categories, information on the direct financial implications of the Reagan tax plan for those in various income brackets was strikingly sparse: just 4.3 percent of TV and print news reports (or about one out of every 23 stories) provided information on the relative direct benefits of the plan for people at different income levels. And only three news stories across the entire period of analysis contained information on how the payroll tax fits into the overall tax responsibilities of people in different income categories. These two pieces of information are especially crucial in the

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<sup>20</sup> I do not suggest that these were the only (or even the most) important facts about tax and domestic budget policy during this episode, only that they were four crucial and clearly relevant pieces of information in the larger historical and policy context of the Reaganite-New Right agenda.

historical and discursive context of the Reagan economic program, as I discuss in detail later in the chapter.

My content analysis evidence in this section resonates broadly with social scientific accounts such as Bennett's (2009 [1983]) conceptualizations of "personalization" and "dramatization" in mainstream news coverage, Cappella and Jamieson's (1997) analysis of strategic framing, and accounts of game-framing and horse-race coverage in policy debates (e.g. Lawrence 2000) and election campaigns (e.g. Patterson 1994). This narrative in coverage of the Reagan tax and budget plans positioned media audiences mainly in the role of passive spectators — rather than active citizens — observing politically constructed elite conflict (perhaps with amusement or disgust), while being offered little substantive content (either in the form of interpretive frames or concrete information) that might enrich their policy preferences and encourage or give meaning to civic participation. Moreover, these spectacles of elite conflict likely "made sense" to many in the news audience: the unfolding drama of individualized power-politics resonated with key strands of American common sense, naturalizing understandings of policymaking as petty official conflict. Such representations of politics arguably confirm impressions of the basically distasteful character of public affairs, even as these popular understandings were the product of prior hegemonic processes, including (though by no means limited to) past encounters with similar constructions of political news.

In sum, the evidence from this stage of my analysis suggests that hegemonic mass media operated in the negative ideological dimension in part simply by limiting the substantive discourse about tax and budget policy that was available to audiences. In the positive ideological register, this news narrative arguably resonated with major currents of American common sense that depict governing elites exclusively as calculating, self-

interested purveyors of insider-politics, while simultaneously romanticizing a similarly elite-based — yet public-spirited — mode of governance akin to an enlightened autocracy. Media outlets' perceived need to make politics “interesting” — which is perhaps intensifying in recent years with the increasing power of entertainment values in the news — is no doubt responsible at one level for this texture of coverage. As Bourdieu (1998: 3) argues:

To justify this policy of demagogic simplification (which is absolutely and utterly contrary to the democratic goal of informing and educating citizens by interesting them), journalists point to the public's expectations. But in fact they are projecting onto the public their own inclinations and their own views. Because they're so afraid of being boring, they opt for confrontations over debates, prefer polemics over rigorous argument, and in general, do whatever they can to promote conflict. They prefer to confront individuals (politicians in particular) instead of confronting their arguments, that is, what's really at stake in the debate.

In an era when interest in public affairs programming, “hard news” and political participation continues to stagnate, mainstream media outlets offer less substantive and more sensational content in a bid to retain and increase audience interest. While this trend may in some cases spur short-term ratings jumps, ultimately it fails to arrest — and may promote — the longer-term erosion of political interest and participation as it solidifies cynical perceptions of public affairs and fuels a retreat toward fatalism and narrowly private concerns: as Bourdieu (1998: 6) suggests, “these mechanisms work in concert to produce a general effect of depoliticization or, more precisely, disenchantment with politics.”<sup>21</sup>

This dynamic arguably is especially powerful among those with less formal education — and thus, generally, less political knowledge and interest — which in our historical context coincides closely with those who have less wealth, income and social advantage

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<sup>21</sup> To be clear, I do not claim that the patterns of elite-focused, non-substantive coverage that I demonstrate here — and that have been depicted in some earlier studies of media content — are the direct or sole *cause* of mass political cynicism or civic disengagement. Trends of declining political knowledge and participation are no doubt the result of a complex configuration of multiple forces, and further empirical research on the precise connections between political discourse, media coverage and citizen engagement is certainly in order. Here, I merely argue that the dominant texture of news coverage during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic program (and, as will become clear from my analyses in Chapters 6 and 7, of the 1995-1996 welfare reform episode) depicted politics in ways that normalized popular civic disengagement: the precise empirical outcomes of this coverage in terms of citizen attitudes and political activity are unclear, although I present some suggestive evidence in Chapter 8.



(Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). In rarely linking public policy issues and the larger political dynamics that surround them to people's practical experiences and life circumstances, mainstream media fosters the perception that (like medicine) politics — in its best sense — is a field for disinterested experts, or — in its worst, as may be the dominant understanding — a game for self-interested cynics bent on personal and partisan advantage. Either way, public affairs constitute a spectacle that neither invites nor rewards collective popular engagement: as Bourdieu (1998: 8) writes, “the world shown by television is one which lies beyond the grasp of ordinary individuals. Linked to this is the impression that politics is for professionals, a bit like high-level competitive sports with their split between athletes and spectators.” These mediated constructions of politics favor prevailing arrangements of class power — and the public policy regimes that have maintained and fortified them in the neoliberal era: with civic participation (including attention to political news and voting behavior) heavily skewed toward the affluent (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005), popular demand for policies that might promote more egalitarian arrangements is muted. Indeed, empirical research has demonstrated that there is little or no elite-level response to the policy preferences (as expressed in surveys) of low- and middle-income Americans, when these preferences differ from those of high-income citizens (Gilens 2005; Bartels 2008: Ch. 9).

However, news content during the 1981 tax and budget episode was not entirely non-substantive. When media sources did say something about the design and implications of these policy initiatives — or the deeper principles that lay behind them — a clear pattern of dominant messages emerged, as did a clear picture of who was propagating these messages. Thus, I turn next to the neoliberal-New Right-inflected contours of economic policy coverage.

#### IV. Content Analyses: The “Liberal Media” Lurches Toward the New Right

To the extent that mainstream news coverage of the 1981 Reagan tax and budget agenda circulated discourse that implicated policy substance or relatively overt, ideologically rooted political positions, this coverage decidedly — though not monolithically — favored New Right voices and themes. Here is another manifestation of neo-Gramscian conceptualizations of the negative ideological dimension in media hegemony: the mass communications environment was narrowed and refracted to favor broadly conservative representations. A number of my quantitative content indicators bear this out, including news source distribution, frame frequencies and overall directional thrust measures.

My analysis of more than 400 network television and Associated Press news reports on the issue showed that Reagan administration voices far and away made up the most frequently cited source. The president himself (20.6 percent) and other partisan executive branch officials comprised 46.8 percent of total voices in the media. When combined with other sources who stood clearly on the right side of the policy spectrum in this case, conservative voices outnumbered ostensibly left-leaning sources 62.8 percent to 26.6 percent, or a factor of more than two-to-one.<sup>22</sup> However, the vast majority of sources identified here as left-leaning were Democratic Party officials — mostly members of Congress — and some of these voices were conservative Southern Democrats, known at the time as “boll weevils.” These sources generally espoused pro-administration positions on tax and budget issues, and often tacked further right than even Reagan’s public proposals went (especially calling for deeper cuts in social programs). Another significant percentage of congressional Democrats comprised a “middle group” (led by House Budget Committee

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<sup>22</sup> Conservative voices were administration sources, Republican Party sources and sources from right-wing interest groups or social movement organizations. Left-leaning voices were Democratic Party sources and sources from progressive/liberal interest groups or SMOs.

Chairman Jim Jones of Oklahoma) that tended to support the administration's anti-welfare state agenda, though not as consistently as did the boll weevils.<sup>23</sup> In any case, there is no doubt that New Right voices (especially those in positions of formal governmental authority) held a decided numerical advantage in mass media coverage of this key policy episode. This can be seen in the relative percentages of voices in different categories depicted in Figure 4-2 above.

Turning to my source-frame analysis — which, as I noted in Chapter 3, identifies the specific themes that mainstream media voices were propagating — the second-most frequent category of statement on the Reagan economic plan of 1981 (after procedural/strategic/tactical) comprised messages that criticized domestic social welfare or business regulatory programs (13.8 percent). As seen in Figure 4-3, this category was followed closely by statements claiming that the administration's tax initiative would boost the national economy (13 percent); and by representations that generally advocated tax cuts — or the Reagan plan in particular — without offering or implying reasons why (8.5 percent). Of total frames, right-leaning messages comprised 38.9 percent, compared to 17 percent for left-leaning messages. Of frame categories that I identified as clearly valenced — i.e. either tending to support or tending to oppose the administration's tax and budget policy agenda — nearly 70 percent were favorable. In terms of specific frames, statements claiming or implying that the Reagan tax plan (or similarly designed initiatives) would stimulate the economy outpaced those that questioned or criticized this notion 13 percent to 4.3 percent; messages that explicitly or implicitly opposed or criticized social or economic regulatory spending outnumbered those that supported these programs 13.7 percent to 7 percent; and

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<sup>23</sup> Interestingly, in conversations with journalist William Greider that occurred over the course of 1981, Stockman actually referred to this bloc led by Jones as “the progressives” for what he considered their forward-thinking views on the need for fiscal austerity (Greider 1982: 32).

messages that generally advocated the Reagan tax plan, similar initiatives or tax cuts in general outpaced their oppositional counterparts 8.5 percent to 2.1 percent.<sup>24</sup> Again, while mass media coverage of this policy episode was not monolithic, neoliberal-New Right messages significantly outpaced critical or oppositional frames.

These findings of heavy source and frame imbalance point to another manifestation of the negative dimension of ideology operating through hegemonic news media: the possibilities for popular challenge and resistance to the Reagan-New Right domestic policy regime were limited by the significant refraction of mass communications discourse toward conservative voices and messages. When such a large proportion of the explicitly ideological discourse in the major venues of public communication is constituted by homogeneous sources and perspectives, there is little opportunity for most people to express contrary policy preferences rooted in alternative articulations linking fragments of popular common sense (or “considerations,” in John Zaller’s terminology) with their material interests and social values. If people are not sufficiently exposed to mass media messages (frames) that critique specific policy proposals (such as the Reagan economic plan) by connecting them with people’s material experiences (such as unemployment or rising prices), and that activate (or prime) value-laden cultural understandings (such as the idea that government should act to promote economic equality), they are likely to express preferences in public opinion polls that appear incoherent or even self-defeating.

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<sup>24</sup> It is difficult to determine the extent to which these news coverage patterns mirrored the positions of political elites as expressed in unmediated statements or congressional votes, as Bennett’s (1990) influential “indexing” hypothesis would seem to predict. Further iterations of this project may include analyses of selected weeks of floor debate in the Congressional Record and precise comparisons to media coverage. In any case, contrary to the intense language of partisan battle that suffused network TV and AP coverage of the episode, most Senate and House Democrats ultimately voted for the 1981 Reagan tax plan, evidencing factional divisions *within* the party caucus at the time, and the successful incorporation of a significant share of national Democratic elites into the emerging neoliberal-New Right hegemony. The legislation passed the Senate 67-8, with just seven of 46 Democrats voting against the plan. In the House, the final tally was 282-95, with 94 of 244 Democrats opposing the policy.

I turn finally to analyses of the directional thrust of news stories on the 1981 economic plan. Figure 4-4 depicts the distribution of this measure over the nearly eight-month period of analysis. Once again, the data show clearly that although news coverage was not monolithic — and from the perspective of neo-Gramscian approaches to hegemony, we should not expect it to be — coverage tilted decidedly rightward. Nearly half the TV and AP stories (49.7 percent) were either “very” or “somewhat favorable,” compared to just 12.7 percent that were “very” or “somewhat unfavorable.” In other words, reports that generally presented a positive picture of the Reagan economic plan, similar New Right-style initiatives, and the neoliberal ideological and policy assumptions that underlay them, outnumbered those that presented a negative picture by nearly four-to-one. Moreover, “very favorable” reports outpaced “very unfavorable” stories by a ratio of more than three-to-one (10.4 percent to 3.2 percent).<sup>25</sup>

The implicit assumptions and inflections of journalistic tone that are one major element of the directional thrust measure — and which are rarely included in quantitative media analyses — are especially crucial here. My findings of right-left source and frame imbalance are less starkly tilted in the conservative direction than are the results from the overall directional thrust analyses because the potential for news reports to generate or subvert mass consent for public policy regimes and political arrangements (as expressed in public opinion polls) is affected by factors that are not easily operationalized into discrete and overtly valenced frames or specific source categories: the underlying premises on which stories are based — the background discursive architecture that sets the range of issues and

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<sup>25</sup> As I explained in Chapter 3, this measure is intended to operationalize a global — and necessarily rough — evaluation of the extent to which media reports would tend to push audiences’ expressed policy opinions toward the Reagan administration’s (New Right) position or away from it. Directional thrust is aimed at capturing a number of distinct story elements that contribute to the valence of a news report, including the ideological balance of sources and frames contained in the story, any ostensibly neutral information in the report, the implicit premises on which the story is based, and the tone of reporters and anchors.

questions that form the “debate” as it is presented in the media — and the tone of unattributed language employed by journalists, may send subtle but important signals to audiences. For instance, unattributed statements of Reagan’s purported public support and “political momentum,” as well as suggestions that passage of his economic plan was inevitable — while not explicitly substantive from a policy perspective — nevertheless generate the appearance of popularly mandated power and success (I offer critical textual analyses of a number of such stories in the next chapter). Similarly, reports that begin from the assumption that income tax cuts necessarily stimulate the economy — with the key questions being how large they should be and for how long a duration — tilt the debate rightward from the outset.<sup>26</sup> Thus, part of the value of my directional thrust measure is its ability to better capture subtler dimensions of media discourse within the overall context of a news story in an operational form that is suitable for quantitative analysis.

In this connection, it is important to note that I coded a substantial portion (37.6 percent) of Reagan economic stories as “neutral” mostly because so much of the news content in this case carried procedural, strategic and tactical themes (this is demonstrated in Section III’s results on general story focus and on source-frames). In fact, many specific messages that I term here “non-substantive” — both those by political actors and by journalists themselves — nevertheless may send implicit signals that can push mass opinion either for or against policy initiatives. I considered these to be “non-substantive” only in the sense that they do not directly address the merits or effects of policy. Indeed, I do not suggest that news reports I coded as “neutral” are “objective” — I doubt that such a thing is possible — nor do I argue that they are without implications for communications power and

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<sup>26</sup> President Reagan himself observed in an April 22, 1981, Associated Press story that “the debate had changed from whether there should be budget and tax cuts to how extensive they should be.”

the dynamics of media hegemony. On the contrary, as I argue above, many of these stories in fact depicted the spectacle of strategic elite conflict, sidelining concrete discussion of the links between policy and socioeconomic conditions, thus normalizing top-down politics and possibly encouraging mass passivity and disengagement. The cherished mainstream journalistic norm of “balance” is also highlighted here, as even reports that include equal numbers of pro- and anti-administration sources and frames — and thus would likely be included in the “neutral” category — constituted a platform for the uncritical transmission of official government sources and perspectives (Bennett 1993b; Bourdieu 1998). As I suggest above, these dynamics may have important ideological implications for power relations in the context of public policymaking.

Thus, the *substance* of the oppositional voices and frames — in other words, how strong and thoroughgoing their criticism is, which is discursively grounded in the underlying assumptions on which news narratives are based, and the implicit premises that undergird political discourse in general — as well as the nuances of journalistic tone, make a substantial difference in the hegemonic texture of media reports. I explore these elements in some detail through the critical textual interpretations presented in Chapter 5.

Still, because the large majority of the American public is not intensely politically engaged or knowledgeable, for opposition and criticism — even fundamental, potentially counter-hegemonic dissent — to have significant effects on the dynamics of consent as expressed in public opinion polls requires that this coverage be frequent and sustained. With only about 50 stories on the 1981 Reagan economic program (or approximately 1.5 per week) tilting substantially leftward — where critical voices and frames drove the narrative — compared to around 200 (or six per week) dominated by New Right sources and messages, the kind of consistent communications volume needed to undermine mass policy support

was probably lacking. These findings of infrequent yet real policy opposition and criticism are in keeping with neo-Gramscian understandings of news media: hegemony is not a seamless system of mass indoctrination; rather, it involves the ideological construction of a social and political discussion that systematically filters and limits the spectrum of voices and ideas while offering some space for challenge and dissent, so long as its scope, frequency and practical implications are controlled.

Moreover, research on individual-level communications processing suggests that when message volume is low in this way, people with lower levels of general political knowledge (which, again, in this context mirror closely those of low socioeconomic status) tend to have more barriers to media framing influence because: 1) they lack a baseline matrix of information and coherent arguments that facilitates the reception of new messages (or, put another way, the elements of popular common sense that are most accessible and salient to them are especially fragmented, contradictory and disconnected from concrete practice), and 2) they simply do not engage with the news as often as those with higher levels of general political knowledge, which means they are not sufficiently exposed to communications (Zaller 1992). To be sure, as I note above, the “strength” of critical policy frames — i.e. how well they capture and reconfigure in oppositional ways key, culturally resonant aspects of common sense, and thus psychologically activate considerations that are positioned to fuel dissent — matters immensely: this is ideology’s “positive” or “constructive” dimension, which I explore in some detail in the next chapter. However, even strong oppositional frames such as these are not likely to have powerful effects on the expression of public opinion if they only appear in major news venues on a handful of occasions over an eight-month-long policy debate. Thus, the hegemonic mass media’s role as a site for the operation of ideology’s *negative* dimension — constricting and channeling the



range of debate to the benefit of powerful interests — remains crucial, as do research methods that can capture such patterns of inclusion and exclusion in large volumes of news coverage.<sup>27</sup>

## V. News Coverage Dynamics: Marginalizing Class, Elevating the Spectacle

How did mass media coverage of the 1981 economic plan change over the course of the policy episode, and with what implications for the construction of hegemony and political power? I engage these temporal questions in this section by presenting analyses pegged to the two major phases of institutional debate over the tax and budget plans. I find: 1) an increasing focus on internal political spectacle and a sidelining of policy substance in the latter stages of debate, and 2) an overall marginalization of explicitly class-based substantive aspects of the Reagan economic agenda throughout the period of analysis, with a significant uptick in news attention to class in the second phase.

I divided the approximately eight-month-long policy episode into two time windows: 1) what I call — following Dorman and Livingston (1994) — the “establishing phase,” during which the broad parameters of policy discussion were set and the details of the issue first came to widespread awareness outside the context of the 1980 election campaign. For this case, the establishing phase comprised January and February 1981, when major political elites returned to Washington after the holidays and Reagan’s cabinet appointees and key

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<sup>27</sup> To be sure, interpersonal communications, social networks and engagement with alternative media — including, potentially, strongly counter-hegemonic sources — also play roles in generating opposition and subverting mass consent for dominant power arrangements and associated public policy regimes.

However, Americans’ direct exposure to left-alternative news outlets today is much lower than is exposure to the mass media, and was probably miniscule in 1981. In addition, even face-to-face social exchange that can fuel oppositional poll results requires the kind of sustained and widespread political discussion that in the contemporary context is rare. Finally, when conservative sources and perspectives so far outpace alternatives in the mass media, the discursive material on which these face-to-face policy discussions are largely based is likely to be of such a character as to discourage counter-hegemonic opinion expression: news representations are not in themselves strongly determinative of attitudes, because experiential factors (influenced by people’s social positions) ensure that what Stuart Hall labels preferred understandings and dominant readings of news texts are not omnipresent. However, media coverage *is* the main mechanism for the “raw” discursive ingredients that articulate policy and political issues to these material and social predispositions. To the extent that such ingredients are dominated by neoliberal-New Right themes and voices, sustained and widespread counter-hegemonic opinion expression faces major obstacles.

policy advisors began to garner some significant media attention, and 2) the “debate phase,” during which formal congressional discussion of the initial Reagan economic program occurred. This comprised March through August 13, 1981.

While non-substantive news story themes characterized a large portion of media reports throughout the entire period of analysis, they were more prevalent during the debate phase. Figures 4-5 and 4-6 depict the primary themes for news stories during the two main periods of the policy episode for TV and print coverage, respectively. On network TV, the procedure/strategy/tactical primary focus comprised a plurality of reports (38.5 percent) even during the early phase, and surged to a remarkable 78 percent during the debate phase. In the Associated Press, such themes characterized just 16.4 percent of stories in the establishing phase, but increased to 44.3 percent during the debate period. In print, by far the largest portion of reports during the early phase (59 percent) was focused on macroeconomics — i.e. the implications of the Reagan plan (and, to some extent, competing alternative policies) for the national economy. Fiscal implications — i.e. how the policy initiatives would impact government revenues, federal budget deficits and the national debt — constituted the main theme for 13.1 percent of AP stories during the first period. On television, macroeconomics was the second-most frequent primary story focus (34.6 percent) during the early phase, followed by fiscal implications (23.1 percent).

Crucially, in both media formats explicitly socioeconomic issues — i.e. how the Reagan policy initiatives would affect various income groups, occupational segments and the broad interests of workers vs. corporations (which I coded as “class implications”) — were heavily marginalized in the early phase: as seen in Figures 4-5 and 4-6, a primary focus on these themes characterized 9.8 percent of AP stories and just 3.9 percent of network evening news reports. These findings confirm Hertsgaard’s (1988: 128-9) impression:

Although network news stories regularly voiced concern that the tax cuts might enlarge the budget deficit, they rarely even hinted at how lopsidedly they would favor rich over poor. The White House apparatus deserves some credit for that. Reagan was outfitted with populist rhetoric with which to sell the tax program, including the wonderfully misleading phrase ‘across the board’ to describe the cuts themselves.

In the next chapter, I explore in some depth this conservative-populist rhetoric in artifacts of New Right political discourse, showing how the kinds of favorable messages so frequently circulated by mass media outlets were internally constructed to resonant with significant segments of the mass public.

Moreover, while news coverage in the winter of 1981 was somewhat more attuned to policy substance than it would become in the spring and summer as legislative gamesmanship heated up, class issues were most heavily sidelined during this key initial period, when the terms of public discussion were largely set. Thus, mass media early and sharply defined the broad purposes and implications of the Reagan plan as stimulation of the national economy — which, as I show in Chapter 5, was typically constructed in a unitary, classless idiom — and, to a somewhat lesser extent, fiscal issues — again generally presented in the language of national financial health. In other words, the key substantive questions centered on whether the new conservative tax and budget policies would light a general economic spark (and, secondarily, whether they would reduce or increase the federal deficit). Crucially, both these questions assume that *all* Americans would enjoy (or suffer) the same fate from the Reagan domestic agenda, ignoring the matter of *which* social interests might gain or lose materially. This dynamic played out even as administration officials and their allies consistently constructed the policy initiatives as helping “ordinary” citizens (often labeled “middle Americans”), by reducing joblessness, consumer prices and tax “burdens.” As I argue in the next chapter, while this category was discursively framed as comprising the

vast majority of Americans at all levels of income and wealth, New Right rhetoric often stressed the purported benefits for lower- and middle-income people.

Still, even in January and February 1981 policy substance did not make up a very large portion of mainstream media discourse on the Reagan economic plan, especially on TV, where the drama of elite maneuvering held center stage. And, as might be expected from an understanding of professional journalistic norms, procedural/strategic/tactical themes became more prominent during the debate phase, as stories increasingly focused on legislative jockeying, internal political bargaining and efforts by the major parties (and to some extent, their nongovernmental allies) to influence public opinion. Reagan's efforts to leverage his personal popularity to ensure the success of his policy agenda were the object of particular mainstream media fascination during this period. As Hertsgaard (1988: 131) argued:

The single greatest political liability of the Reagan program — the fact that it deprived the many while subsidizing the few — escaped serious and sustained scrutiny by the nation's major news organizations. For television in particular, the story in the summer of 1981 was not Rich vs. Poor but Gipper Sweeps Congress.

Just when political leaders — particularly in Congress — were presumably combing through policy details, evaluating their implications for constituency interests and ideological principles, and taking positions accordingly — news coverage increasingly sidelined substantive aspects of the Reagan tax and budget plans, especially their class implications. These findings of an increased strategic focus as legislative debate occurs mirror those in Lawrence's (2000) analysis of welfare reform: indeed, her study indicated that substantive coverage of the policy's implications was much more prevalent after President Clinton announced he would sign the bill than during congressional debate.

In terms of the slant of news stories on the Reagan economic plan from the standpoint of explicit ideology, coverage was remarkably homogenous across both periods

of analysis, and in both media formats. Figures 4-7 and 4-8 illustrate distributions of the directional thrust measure for the two phases, in television and AP coverage, respectively. To be sure, the proportion of “neutral” reports on network TV and in print coverage increased substantially during the debate phase (from 29.6 percent to 47.6 percent, and from 17.5 percent to 39.2 percent, respectively), reflecting the increasing focus on procedure, political strategy and tactics. Still, rightward-leaning stories were dominant in both periods, and overwhelmingly so during the establishing phase (62.9 percent favorable to 7.4 percent unfavorable on TV, and 66.6 percent favorable to 15.9 percent unfavorable in the Associated Press).

Class crept back into the mainstream media landscape during the debate period — mainly on television — as some Democratic elites began criticizing the Reagan tax plan for favoring the wealthy (as seen in Figures 4-5 and 4-6, the proportion of stories with a primary focus on socioeconomic aspects of the issue more than doubled to 11.9 percent on TV, but went up only marginally in the AP, to 12 percent). However, it is clear that socioeconomic implications never were a major part of the 1981 Reagan economic policy debate as it was depicted in the mass media. In both formats and during both major phases of the policy episode, class implications constituted the least frequent primary story focus, with the exception of TV during the debate phase. But even during this latter period, socioeconomic issues were the main theme for less than 12 percent of evening news reports, a number that is dwarfed by the overwhelming focus on legislative procedure, political strategy and tactics (78 percent).

Moreover, source-frames that evoked class as an element of the tax initiative comprised just 5.6 percent of total frames in TV and print news coverage across the entire period of analysis: messages claiming that the Reagan tax plan would directly benefit low-

and middle-income people or ordinary workers made up 1.4 percent of the total, messages criticizing the plan as tilted toward the wealthy comprised 3.5 percent, and messages conceding that the Reagan tax initiative favored high-income people but that this was nevertheless fair, necessary and/or beneficial to the nation made up 0.7 percent of total frames (see Figure 3).<sup>28</sup> In contrast, source-frames related to macroeconomics — evoking the tax plan’s implications for the national economy as understood in broad, classless and unitary terms — were more than three times as common as class-based messages, comprising 17.3 percent of total frames.<sup>29</sup> As a nonpartisan research report at the time succinctly put it, “equity of distribution of tax cuts was an oft-raised but never really dominant issue in the development of the 1981 tax program.” (Tax Foundation 1981: 6)

However, if news sources — from the Reagan administration, the congressional Democratic caucus and elsewhere — rarely discussed the tax plan in class terms, perhaps journalists themselves filled this void, either making unattributed interpretive statements about the policy’s implications for different income/wealth strata or occupational groups, or else using their professional autonomy to include factual information on the actual breakdown of direct tax benefits by income bracket. My evidence shows clearly that they did not. Just 10 times did journalists offer unattributed statements about the plan’s class implications, in a total of more than 400 broadcast TV and print stories over nearly eight months of coverage. Moreover, my analysis reveals that explicit breakdowns of the tax policy’s direct benefits by income bracket appeared in the news just 17 times in total.

Perhaps as importantly, information that compared payroll taxes — i.e. deductions for Social

<sup>28</sup> This is in sharp contrast to debate over the very similar tax plan successfully advocated by the George W. Bush administration in 2001. While the shape and implications of this policy — along with most of the hegemonic discourse surrounding it — were very much in line with the 1981 Reagan plan, in 2001 the administration and its neoliberal-New Right allies much more frequently framed the policy as a direct help for struggling low- and middle-income families. And in the later episode, the major broadcast networks circulated these messages consistently, while infrequently offering alternative interpretations (Guardino 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Of course, as seen in Figure 4-3 above, source-frames with no substantive policy implications dominated the total, making up fully 40 percent of total messages across the AP and the broadcast networks.

Security and Medicare — to income taxes in terms of their relative impacts on different class or income strata appeared in the news just three times during the policy debate (twice on network TV and once in my AP sample). This is crucial, because payroll taxes are highly regressive — i.e. they soak up a much larger proportion of disposable income from lower-income people than they do from higher-income people, and the majority of people pay more in Medicare and Social Security taxes than they do in federal income taxes.<sup>30</sup> Of course, the inaugural Reagan tax plan — and all major alternatives circulated in Congress at the time — did *not* lower the payroll tax rate, or otherwise reduce the amount of these taxes owed by workers. In contrast, income taxes are progressive, in that the income tax rate increases with increasing income, and there is an annual income below which one is not subject to these taxes. In fact, on a parallel policy track the administration at this time was floating ideas for “reforming” the Social Security system in order to save it from ostensible insolvency, including possibly *increasing* the payroll tax rate while leaving in place the Social Security deductions earnings cap (and reducing scheduled payouts by dramatically cutting early retirement benefits and eliminating the minimum grant). In any case, discussion of these complicating tax issues — which would have contradicted the New Right’s populist narrative — was nearly invisible in mainstream media coverage of the 1981 Reagan plan.<sup>31</sup>

Even the most frequently propagated category of concrete information — dollar tallies of federal social or regulatory programs slated for reduction or elimination — did not appear very often in the mainstream media: 14 percent of Associated Press stories in my

<sup>30</sup> This is because: 1) payroll tax deductions are assessed at a flat rate: everyone who takes in “earned income” pays the same percentage for these deductions, whether they are a minimum wage cashier at a fast food establishment or a corporate lawyer, 2) there is an annual income cap for the (larger) Social Security portion of these deductions (it was \$29,700 in 1981, and \$106,800 in 2010), and 3) only wages and salaries (and not income from investments and interest) is subject to these taxes. In 2009, employees were assessed a 7.65 percent payroll tax rate (6.2 percent for Social Security and 1.45 percent for Medicare), with employers required to match that same rate. Self-employed people must pay the total tax on their own.

<sup>31</sup> Indeed, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, from 1977 (when an early round of upper-bracket tax reductions began during the Carter administration, presaging the sharp right turn to come later) through the end of the Reagan presidency in 1988, the top 5 percent in the income distribution (and especially the top 1 percent) was the only group to see a substantial reduction in *total* effective federal tax rates (including payroll taxes) (Phillips 1990: 82-3).

sample contained this kind of information, along with just 9 percent of network TV reports. Of course, the domestic programs targeted for reduction or elimination in 1981 — such as food stamps and job-training — served mostly lower- and lower-middle-income people.<sup>32</sup> In an AP report where he attempts to explain his party's apparent inability or unwillingness to effectively oppose the administration's cuts, Speaker O'Neill claimed that "Reagan won so big on the budget partly because so few Americans understand the details of the legislation or 'what we're fighting for.'" My empirical evidence offers support for this contention — while specific policy information in the mass media is by no means sufficient to induce such understanding, the frequent inclusion of this sort of information certainly would have placed a more concrete and critical cast on the issue than was the case in a news environment dominated by stories largely circulating abstract attacks on the welfare state and "big government." Repeated circulation of such information on the class implications of the Reagan policies may have primed or activated alternative elements of popular common sense (considerations) that otherwise remained dormant, leading a substantial number of people to express opposition to these moves in public opinion polls.

My analysis in this chapter shows clearly that news audiences rarely were exposed to such policy information. Instead, the major broadcast networks and the Associated Press most frequently circulated frames demonizing federal social provision and economic regulation, and advocating the 1981 tax plan as a tonic to reinvigorate the stumbling national economy in the interests of "productive" ordinary workers and entrepreneurs. Moreover, the large majority of voices appearing in mainstream media during this historically crucial policy debate were right-of-center political elites, and when they had anything to say about policy

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<sup>32</sup> Budget Director Stockman had planned to propose a series of so-called "Chapter II" cuts that would target programs that benefited wealthier citizens, corporate interests and the military, but Reagan balked at these ideas. In any case, Stockman — who was philosophically supportive of the need for a military build-up and clearly friendly to business in general — saw these secondary cuts merely as "equity ornaments," or strategic moves to make the Reagan agenda appear not to unfairly target workers and poor people. (Greider 1982: 25-27).



substance, it was usually in the mold of these neoliberal-New Right themes. Through mechanisms of negative ideology, concrete information that raised doubts about this narrative was very rarely reported by mainstream media outlets, and frames — emanating from elite or other sources — that challenged right-wing constructions of tax and budget policy were circulated in substantially lower frequencies.

## **VI. Television Magnifies the Spectacle, but the “Medium is (Not) the (Whole) Message”**

On the whole, the major communicative outlines presented in this chapter — a largely non-substantive, elite-focused narrative of procedure and political strategy presented to audiences as a dramatic spectacle, combined with a substantive policy narrative tilted decidedly toward the New Right — suffused both network TV and Associated Press coverage of the 1981 Reagan economic program. Still, my findings do reveal a few significant differences in the ideological texture of print and TV content, which are arguably traceable to the divergent socially constructed tendencies of the two mediums. However, the evidence overall suggests that news coverage patterns during U.S. public policy episodes are, in the main, a social-political-economic — rather than primarily a technical — phenomenon. This is just as neo-Gramscian theories of mass communications hegemony would suggest.

Coverage presenting the elite-centered dramatic spectacle was more prominent on television than in print. For example, as seen in Figure 4-9, network stories carried primary non-substantive themes at an astounding clip of 70.8 percent, compared to 35.8 percent for print news. Moreover, as shown in Figure 4-10, journalistic reliance upon official government sources was somewhat less pronounced in AP stories (84.7 percent) than in TV reports (95.2 percent). And voices from the Reagan administration were significantly more prominent on television (52.6 percent of total sources) than in print (43.9 percent). Finally,

as seen in Figure 4-11 — which shows the total proportions of left-leaning, right-leaning and procedural/strategic/tactical source-frames by media format — messages devoid of policy or explicitly ideological substance made up 44.4 percent of the total in network coverage of the Reagan initiative, compared to 32.4 percent in the AP.

These results are not surprising in light of the formal differences between visual and purely linguistic news presentations, and the closely intertwined implications for content. TV may lend itself especially to dramatic and personalized displays of strategic elite conflict — both because of the vividness of visual representations carrying this theme and because of the shorter news segments on television, which put a premium on simple narrative presentations punctuated by brief, pithy quotes and characterized by limited details on policy substance and ideological positions. Newspapers' lower reliance on official sources also may in part be a function of this larger textual space — while not comprising a significant proportion of total voices, both interest group/social movement sources (right- and left-leaning) and expert/research/academic voices were much more prevalent in print than on television.<sup>33</sup> Newspaper reporters perhaps took advantage of the relatively greater freedom to include ostensibly credible non-governmental sources after the professionally socialized obligatory presentation of Republican and Democratic elites. Moreover, visual media workers — particularly on the network news, and especially during an age when these outlets were dominant in the journalism industry — typically see their primary job as presenting the major headlines of the day (focusing on the most dramatic, and, presumably, newsworthy actions by key elite actors), rather than offering detailed analysis and elaboration.

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<sup>33</sup> In AP reports, each of these categories made up about 4 percent of total sources, compared to 1.2 percent for conservative nongovernmental groups, 1.5 percent for progressive or liberal NGOs and just 0.5 percent for expert voices on the network news.

However, the differences between television and print media treatment of the 1981 Reagan economic plan were minor in terms of the left-right character of news sources, frames and overall slant. For instance, basically pro-administration voices outnumbered anti-administration sources 64.4 percent to 32.1 percent on network TV, and 62 percent to 23.8 percent in my sample of AP coverage. As seen in Figure 4-11, the ratio of right-leaning to left-leaning source-frames (as a proportion of total frames) was 29.9 percent to 19.5 percent on television, and 38.8 percent to 13.5 percent in print.

As shown in Figure 4-12, a somewhat larger proportion of TV broadcasts were “neutral” on the directional thrust measure (44.1 percent, compared to 33.9 percent for print stories in this category). Coverage variation on this measure is largely due to television’s overwhelming focus on the procedural, strategic and tactical spectacle of elite maneuvering (and, thus, its greater marginalization of explicit policy substance), combined with a heavier reliance on the journalistic norm of balance. Thus, the AP circulated a greater number of overtly ideologically valenced reports (66.1 percent) than did TV (55.9 percent) (see Figure 12). This difference is almost completely attributable to several print articles (in my sample, 10, to be exact) that included overwhelmingly left-leaning source and frame distributions. Thus, mainstream print news — or at least the Associated Press — may have had a somewhat greater propensity to offer a nearly unilateral platform to critical policy views, including some that may be considered potentially counter-hegemonic.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> For instance, the AP circulated a piece on May 4, 1981, headlined “Economist Galbraith Warns Against ‘Pop Economics.’” This story, which was pegged to former Kennedy administration advisor John Kenneth Galbraith’s newly published memoir, included several disparaging statements on Reagan policy with no messages of support. And the wire service sent out a report on June 3, headlined “Nader Group Offers Yet Another Tax Program,” about an alternative plan developed by an NGO that would target tax reductions at low- and middle-income citizens, close corporate loopholes, and scale back or eliminate many benefits for businesses and the affluent. This latter piece, which again included no messages supporting the Reagan plan or similar initiatives, is remarkable in that it was the only story in my dataset that covered a tax policy plan suggested by a left-leaning interest group. Notably, while they featured much substantive criticism of the Reagan policy agenda, both these pieces were also heavily personalized depictions. See also the June 11, 1981, story headlined “Economists Say Reagan Plan Will Make Rich Richer,” in which Massachusetts Institute of Technology economist Lester C. Thurow claimed that the administration’s agenda was “designed to produce an American society with a more unequal distribution of income and wealth,” and in which Coretta Scott King suggested that

Still, we ought not to overstate the theoretical and substantive importance of these differences between print and visual media. Reliance on official sources was heavy in both formats. In addition, both for overall story themes and specific source-frames, non-substantive representations — with their dramatic language of “battle,” “contest” and “game” in a spectacle of clashing elite titans — made up the largest categories in my quantitative analyses of both print and TV stories. Moreover, my directional thrust analyses — based on the most complete indicator of explicit ideological tendencies in the context of this policy debate that I could construct — show that news stories in both media formats tilted overwhelmingly in favor of the New Right-backed Reagan economic plan. In the AP sample, generally conservative-leaning reports outnumbered progressive-leaning stories 49.4 percent to 16.7 percent; on the evening news, right-leaning stories outnumbered left-leaning reports 50.4 percent to 5.5 percent (see Figure 4-12). And the distributions of media voices along the conventional left-right political spectrum were nearly identical across formats.

Professional norms and work routines — and background political-economic positions — differ somewhat between the television networks and the print newswires, and these differences no doubt have some significant effects in terms of content — and, thus, in terms of potential effects on public opinion. However, the elite-focused spectacle and the favoring of right-wing voices and themes in this policy case arguably is more a function of the mainstream media’s structural position as a dominant ideological mechanism, than of factors directly traceable to journalistic practices and media technologies. My empirical analyses of news coverage during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic program largely

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the ascendance of the New Right may necessitate “massive demonstrations” akin to those during the Civil Rights Movement; protests on such a scale did not materialize. And on July 7, the Associated Press distributed a report headlined “AFL-CIO President Attacks Reaganomics,” in which the president of the national labor federation claimed that the Reagan tax and budget program — which he likened to the pre-New Deal *laissez faire* regime — would create “social disaster” unless popular forces mobilized against the “right wing economic fakers” advocating these policies.

bear out the critical-theoretical proposition of media hegemony as a social-political-economic process: the content differences between media formats are significant, but not striking.

## **VII. Discussion and Conclusion: Mass Consent and the March of the New Right**

My empirical analyses so far leave unaddressed the crucial question of precisely how engagement with mainstream news coverage might have differing implications for the cultivation of hegemonic or potentially counter-hegemonic perspectives among audiences, and, thus, the fortification or undermining of mass consent as expressed in public opinion polls during policymaking episodes. I take up these issues in my individual-level experimental analysis of framing, priming and the activation of popular common sense in Chapter 8. For now, it is worthwhile to outline what my news coverage evidence suggests about the role of media hegemony in shaping public consent for the neoliberal-New Right shift in economic and social welfare policy, even though my methodology at this stage cannot establish causal relationships or empirically identify mechanisms of opinion influence.

At face value, most contemporary polling results appear to show strong public backing for the 1981 Reagan economic agenda, although reported support for the tax portion of the plan appeared to increase as the Washington debate proceeded. A CBS News-New York Times poll conducted in late January 1981 showed that 24 percent of respondents wanted a “large income tax cut,” 52 percent preferred a “smaller” cut and just 16 percent wanted no cut at all. In the same survey, 58 percent reported that they believed the new president could “clean up the welfare system” (as I note in Section II, Reagan’s first-year budget proposal included deep benefit cuts and eligibility limitations for AFDC and other programs for the poor) (Clymer 1981a). A survey by the same organization conducted from April 22 through 26 indicated 37 percent approval for the Reagan tax plan, compared to just

11 percent disapproval, and 35 percent support for the administration's proposed cuts in domestic spending, compared to 14 percent opposition (Clymer 1981b).

In an April 13-15, 1981, AP-NBC News survey, 58 percent of respondents said they favored the president's plan to "cut(ing) federal spending by \$49 billion in the next year, reducing many programs," compared to 16 percent who opposed this idea. In the same poll, Reagan's plan to "cut(ing) federal income tax rates by 10 percent a year for each of the next three years" garnered 71 percent support against 15 percent opposition. And 79 percent said it was either "very" or "somewhat likely" that the tax and budget plan would boost the economy. These results were largely unchanged a little more than a month later: 56 percent expressed support for the Reagan budget cuts, compared to 18 percent opposed.<sup>35</sup> And 64 percent in this later poll signaled support for the administration's supply-side tax plan, compared to 22 percent who expressed opposition. Moreover, 69 percent of respondents to the May 1981 survey said federal income taxes were too high (compared to 25 percent who said they were "about right" and 1 percent who said they were too low), while 29 percent said taxes on business were too high, compared to 24 percent who said they were "about right" and 20 percent who said such taxes were too low. Even a June 1981 survey fielded by a Democratic firm showed that 56 percent of respondents agreed with "President Reagan's plans for cutting the budget," compared to 29 percent who disagreed (Cattani 1981).<sup>36</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Respondents to this poll had the option to "oppose some cuts but favor others," a choice that 16 percent made.

<sup>36</sup> Of course, as Lewis (2001) argues persuasively, poll questions themselves also have deep implications for ideological hegemony. It is not precisely clear what the designers of the January CBS News-New York Times survey meant by "clean up the welfare system." But in the neoliberal-New Right discursive context of the time, most respondents probably interpreted this to imply ending the widespread "abuse" of benefits by poor people: this wording presupposes that such abuse is a significant problem that policymakers ought to address.

Or consider this item from the April 13-15 AP-NBC News survey: "If you had to choose between one of the following three actions, which do you think the federal government should do first: cut federal spending, cut federal taxes or increase defense spending?" Of course, all three options were integral parts of the Reagan-New Right agenda. Moreover, the choices do not indicate anything about *whose* taxes and *which* (domestic) spending programs would be cut.

However, mass opinion does not form in a vacuum, and the public policy preferences that are expressed in polls do not come pre-formed to the arenas of political debate and governance. Rather, public opinion emerges from complex processes that are deeply implicated in the power-laden dynamics of mass communication. One set of results from the summer 1981 survey conducted by Democratic operatives is instructive here: initially, this poll registered 53 percent approval for the Reagan tax proposal, compared to 37 percent opposition. But after respondents were informed of the upper-class skew of the plan's proximate financial benefits, support dropped to 21 percent, while opposition surged to 69 percent: as Democratic pollster Vic Fingerhut told the *Christian Science Monitor*, "support for Reagan's economic program is based largely on lack of public awareness of its contents, particularly its large tax cuts for the wealthy. As the public becomes more familiar with the specific cuts, support for Reagan's program is likely to drop, possibly precipitously." (Cattani 1981)

But mainstream news media's infrequent inclusion of factual information that might cast doubt on any of the New Right constructions that I draw out in this chapter — along with the substantially lower proportions of oppositional voices offering skeptical or dissenting ideological articulations — stand out starkly in the case of Reagan's 1981 tax and budget plan. Moreover, critical non-governmental voices were marginalized nearly to the point of mainstream media invisibility, and on the few occasions when left-leaning protest organizations made the news, the reports lacked substance and context. In general, elite sources dominated coverage, and a dramatic spectacle of official conflict largely devoid of policy substance formed the substructure of print and TV news treatment of this historic policy debate: by the time the Democratic poll was fielded, mainstream media coverage for months had been slanted toward neoliberal-New Right perspectives — and it would

continue to be so — forestalling the “precipitous” decline in reported popular support for the Reagan economic agenda that the pollster predicted.

These negative ideological dynamics — whereby the hegemonic news media circulates a narrowly refracted depiction of policy issues and political processes that serves ultimately to prop up prevailing arrangements of social power — make it plausible that many Americans who expressed support for the neoliberal-New Right economic agenda in public opinion polls would not have done so if they had the opportunity to engage with a more discursively diverse and informationally rich mass media landscape. With the bulk of substantive policy discourse in the news presenting abstract conservative tropes and general right-leaning populist messages assailing public social service and business regulatory programs, glorifying private enterprise, and promising national economic rebirth through tax reduction, the New Right was largely successful in circulating representations that captured — and primed — elements of common sense that placed it in a favorable position to win a measure of mass consent for its sweeping goals. Critical analysis that combines a neo-Gramscian conceptualization of ideological processes in media coverage with social scientific-psychological models of attitude formation cautions us to read polls suggesting popular endorsement of the conservative domestic agenda at its inception with skepticism. From the perspective of democratic ideals — according to which the propagation through news media of a diverse range of ideological voices and policy perspectives, as well as concrete and relevant information, is expected to help people express policy preferences that will advance their material interests and social values — this is not a cheerful situation.

In particular, my evidence of media coverage in this chapter is remarkable for the consistency of elite-focused and personalized presentations of the 1981 Reagan economic plan. To be sure, when official voices were depicted as addressing substantive policy



dimensions, they often spoke in conservative-populist language that argued the benefits of the neoliberal-New Right agenda for the majority of struggling workers, farmers and small business people. But ordinary people themselves — and even representatives of nongovernmental research and advocacy groups — almost never appeared in the news speaking (in direct quotes or reporters' paraphrases) on their own behalf. Moreover, the prevalence of procedural, strategic and tactical coverage suggests that the overall media focus was on these elites' relationships *to each other* — i.e. their roles as government officials — rather than on the connections between the policy ideas they advocated and the material interests and life circumstances of popular social constituencies. Thus, the individualized and elite focus of mass communications discourse in this case carries multiple levels of significance: as I show in some detail in the next chapter, the dominant substantive articulations of tax and budget policy offered by elite voices in the news evoked private market individualism as a social norm and a political goal, while constructing this vision democratically as being in the popular interest. In addition, as I argue above, the news focus on official perspectives and elite voices favored top-down understandings of politics, thus constructing public affairs as over the heads of most citizens, and possibly cultivating popular depoliticization.

However, the fabric of media coverage itself may also have privileged personalized and individualized constructions that favor neoliberal-New Right policy interpretations. Previous empirical research suggests that subtle communications dynamics can have powerful effects: for instance, individualized and episodic TV news portrayals of poverty — regardless of whether they overtly assign responsibility to low-income people — have been shown to make audiences more likely to blame the poor for their plight (and less likely to assign responsibility to larger forces that might be amenable to political action), as compared

to (in the U.S. mass media, the much less prevalent) thematically grounded stories (Iyengar 1991). Thus, it may be that even these more indirect inflections of news coverage have played a role in generating mass consent for the neoliberal-New Right hegemony: not only have explicit substantive messages in the media (such as those I analyze in President Reagan's rhetoric in the next chapter) operated in the positive ideological register to encourage favorable public responses to market-individualist policy approaches, but the very texture of news coverage — in its depiction of politics and public affairs as being *about individuals*, particularly, in this case, government officials themselves — may privilege and activate elements of popular common sense (considerations) that encourage the expression of consent for conservative policies in opinion polls.

From an historical perspective, the mass communications patterns I depict in this chapter not only created a favorable environment for significant popular endorsement and legislative enactment of the 1981 economic plan, but also set in motion a trend of political communications and elite discourse that — as I show in my analysis of the 1995-1996 welfare reform episode in Chapters 6 and 7 — has been consolidated since then. In the next chapter, I turn to a critical textual analysis of this discourse, examining Reagan speeches, news stories and nongovernmental policy documents, searching for keys to the effectiveness of the neoliberal-New Right voices and frames that dominated mass media coverage, and exploring the (largely unrealized) possibilities for powerful alternative messages.

## Chapter 5 -- Right-Populism as Political Performance: Economic Policy

### Discourse at the Dawn of Reaganism

#### I. Introduction: Sketching the Discursive Landscape

By now, the broad outlines of mass media coverage during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic program should be clear. Network TV news and Associated Press reports heavily emphasized the dramatic spectacle of elite strategic maneuvering, political tactics and internal procedural gambits (Debord 2010 [1967]; Edelman 1988). When mainstream news did engage the substance of tax and budget policy, neoliberal-New Right actors and themes held a decided numerical advantage over alternative sources and perspectives, while official government voices were dominant throughout. My quantitative evidence from the relatively comprehensive content analyses presented in the last chapter supports this interpretation along a number of indicators: tallies of news voices, specific source-frames and concrete policy information, along with overall story themes and the broad left-right slant of media reports. These findings illustrate neo-Gramscian understandings of the *negative* dimension of ideology: the discursive environment as manifest within news media in this case was dominated almost completely by official voices, and was limited largely to themes devoid of policy substance or explicitly ideological principles; at the same time, the substantive debate that did emerge narrowly favored specifically right-of-center sources and perspectives. A political communications environment refracted in these ways offers strong evidence to question the foundations of democratic consent for the Reagan economic agenda as expressed in public opinion polls at the time.

However, a richer understanding of the hegemonic (and, potentially, counter-hegemonic) fabric of media coverage during policy episodes such as this requires more than quantitative content analyses, however illuminating these are in identifying general patterns

of sourcing, framing and policy information in large volumes of news texts. Such an investigation also requires a method that can draw out the meanings of these coverage dynamics by situating them in historical and cultural context, and identifying the threads of popular common sense at play in political discourse. Demonstrating how media coverage of public policy manifests ideology's *positive* register — i.e. how news artifacts (and the sources from which they draw) construct social visions in language and imagery that are substantively positioned to affect the expression of mass consent in opinion polls — requires a qualitative strategy of interpretive textual analysis.<sup>1</sup> To that end, in this chapter I turn to critical semiotics to map the discursive landscape during debate over the Reagan tax and budget plans of 1981.

My qualitative analysis of selected political texts suggests that neoliberal-New Right forces successfully captured and repackaged several culturally resonant strands of American common sense, and plausibly articulated them with the lived reality of economic stagnation and social frustration, and with their preferred conservative tax and budget policy responses.<sup>2</sup> This discourse — which blended neoliberal market individualism with right-wing populism — emphasized cultural and material elements in configurations that legitimated and furthered arrangements of class power favorable to the emerging conservative

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<sup>1</sup> As I explained in Chapter 2, neo-Gramscian conceptualizations define negative ideological operations as processes that *limit or restrict* the range of perspectives that mass publics engage with in popular cultural venues, such as the news media; positive ideological operations concern the circulation of perspectives that *resonate with predispositional strands of popular common sense*, including cultural narratives, stereotypes, images and fragments of information, thereby *constructing or producing* socio-political worldviews that are reflected in (among other instruments) opinion polls. It should be made clear that while these two registers of ideology can be analytically distinguished (i.e. the shaping of popular consciousness occurs in different ways and with somewhat different effects in the two dimensions), they cannot be sharply differentiated on an empirical plane. The two concepts are integrally related, so each instance of negative ideological operations also has a positive face — i.e. in the context of my study, words and images that appear in mass media represent a systematically limited set of messages, but they also at the same time operate positively to shape public perceptions by articulating elements of common sense with material conditions and with economic policy approaches. This understanding is consistent with the notion (explicit in my research design) that certain research methods are best able to capture one or the other aspect of ideological operations.

<sup>2</sup> The texts that I analyze in this chapter and in Chapter 7, which concerns discourse surrounding the 1995-1996 welfare reform debate, are meant neither to be a random sample of available and relevant communications, nor to be statistically representative of the “population” of texts along any particular dimension. Rather, I chose these artifacts because they illustrate most sharply key discursive strands in the context of the neoliberal-New Right ascendancy as voiced by key political actors, often at important points in the policy debates. Thus, while the selection may be said to reflect “sampling bias,” any such bias is intentional and, indeed, central to my analysis.

hegemony in the early 1980s. I identify three key strands in elite and media discourse that operated to support the right turn in economic and social welfare policy (see Table 5-1 for a summary):

- 1) A substantive discourse of *neoliberal right-wing populism* that glorified rugged market individualism and reformulated class lines to pit oppressed private economic actors of all levels of income and wealth, on the one hand, against an overbearing liberal elite bent on stifling freedom, opportunity and initiative for the benefit of undeserving (racialized and gendered) social elements, on the other.
  
- 2) A *procedural-populist* discourse, which connected popular sovereignty and democratic legitimacy to the Reagan administration and its New Right backers. Key texts construct these actors as the rightful executors of the public will to slash taxes and social/regulatory spending, based on the 1980 election results, letters to government officials and other political mechanisms.
  
- 3) A *spectacle of elite performance*, characterized by a mixture of metaphors from war and show business. Although both explicitly political actors and institutions, on the one hand, and news outlets, on the other, contributed toward the two strands of discourse above, media itself was more central in this current. Representations of elite spectacle were produced and circulated through news norms and practices that emphasize what are thought to be compelling and dramatic narrative packages largely devoid of policy substance. Ideologically, this discourse operated to reinforce the separation of ordinary citizens from government officials and other elite actors.

As my analyses in Chapter 4 show, frames based on these narrative strands dominated mass media coverage, even as favorable public opinion polls reflected and reinforced the hegemonic political communications environment that resulted.

But my evidence here also shows that alternative social visions and policy views — including those that went beyond the orthodox Democratic Party messages of New Deal/Great Society-embedded liberalism (Harvey 2005: 11-12) — were available in public discourse around the time of the Reagan tax and budget plan episode. Moreover, these ideas — which were centered on the notion of *economic democracy* — have deep historical roots and draw on culturally potent elements of American popular common sense, reformulating them to support left-of-center policy agendas that have the potential to resonate in mass consciousness. As I demonstrated in the last chapter, perspectives such as these, which may be considered counter-hegemonic — i.e. those that rejected both the right-wing offensive and many elements of the center-left ideological regime it was overtaking — were virtually ignored by mainstream news outlets. This marginalization through mechanisms of negative ideology may have hastened the conservative ascendancy by denying popular audiences the opportunity to consider ideas about economic and social welfare policy that strongly opposed neoliberal-New Right goals and understandings, but lacked the material and cultural liabilities of embedded liberalism.

As I describe more fully in Chapter 3, critical semiotics as I employ it in this study is an analytic method that connects cultural texts — in this case, news media stories, elite speeches and non-governmental policy tracts — to the wider social forces that produce and consume them by explicating the symbolic systems that they draw upon and construct (Barthes 1972 [1957]; Turner 2003 [1990]: 13-17). To complement and enrich the quantitative analyses of mainstream media content during debate over the 1981 economic

program I presented in the last chapter, I offer socially and historically grounded interpretations of four pieces of news coverage (three Associated Press and one network TV story); two major presidential speeches (the February 18 and April 28 addresses to joint sessions of Congress); one policy paper from a major New Right interest group; and one example of policy discourse from a left-leaning social movement organization that opposed the tax and budget plans. Full transcripts of these artifacts are reproduced in the Appendix.

## **II. “The Shopkeeper, the Farmer and the Craftsman:” Reagan as Producer-Champion**

I begin with the president’s address to a joint session of Congress on February 18, 1981, designed to promote the administration’s package of deep domestic budget cuts and supply-side tax reductions as the antidote to a faltering economy. This address encapsulates the key substantive conservative-populist articulations deployed by the New Right in promoting the economic plan, which formed the basis for most frames explicitly supporting the Reagan policies that appeared in the mass media coverage for which I offered content analyses in the last chapter. The speech drew heavily on the right-wing “producerist” discourse (Berlet and Lyons 2000) that I described in Chapter 2 by articulating possessive-individualist themes of ordinary people competing in private markets to support themselves and their families, with the material conditions of economic stagnation, and with the Reagan policy plans as solutions to popular grievances that bring America back to its traditional roots. Reagan set this articulation against a dark vision of patronizing and implicitly parasitic Washington liberal elites (members of the “New Class”) who caused the economic ills by unwise and presumptuous socioeconomic engineering, and who offered more of the same as false solutions to the national crisis. Ultimately, the effect of these right-populist articulations — or the “preferred” (though not guaranteed) reading of the speech — was to reconstruct

class lines in ways that were favorable to New Right political goals and neoliberal socioeconomic arrangements, and further, to present this reconstruction as the genuine popular will of the people, a theme which the administration offered more explicitly and forcefully in later speeches and news stories that drew on the procedural-populist discourse.

Reagan was greeted by a thunderous ovation in his first formal appearance before Congress, and it took House Speaker O'Neill several attempts to gavel the chamber to order. The president began by inviting the nation to “share in restoring the promise that is offered to every citizen by this, the last, best hope of man on earth” (paragraph 2). Here he signaled that this economic plan — and the neoliberal-New Right themes on which it was based — was part of a grand narrative in which the current policy moves would bring America back to the original principles and practices on which it was founded. Somehow since then, this “promise” — which “*every citizen*” is offered, a phrase that is the first of many significations blurring divisions of power and class interest by evoking the connotative codes of national unity, equality and common purpose — has been forgotten or broken. “Last, best hope of man on earth” lends a dramatic, almost messianic tone, producing the connotative signification of the United States as a model to the world, and specifically the Reagan economic plan as not only resurrecting the nation in a time of existential peril, but leading the globe toward a better future implicitly constructed in the American political-economic tradition.<sup>3</sup> During much of the rest of the speech, the president undertakes to explain how the nation has lost its way, and how he and his New Right allies will lead it back — and forward into a brighter future.

After this opening, Reagan began the series of right-populist articulations that linked his budget and tax plans to culturally resonant elements of American popular self-

<sup>3</sup> “Last, best hope of man on earth” is a favorite Reagan phrase that he had deployed in a speech supporting Goldwater’s 1964 presidential campaign.



understanding. This was accomplished by setting out a series of binary and opposed signs, for which the key signifiers are reproduced in Table 5-2. The words and phrases in the left column were articulated on the policy level with tax cuts, reductions in social welfare and business regulatory programs, and spending increases in military programs. Those in the right column signified obstacles to and enemies of the conservative-populist cause that such moves advanced. Reagan builds a potent narrative with these opposed signs, thus constructing in the positive ideological register a culturally resonant vision that legitimated the neoliberal-New Right economic agenda.

First, the president clearly lays out the problems: millions of Americans are unemployed, and millions more are threatened by the prospect of joblessness while simultaneously suffering the misery of high prices or “punishing inflation” (paragraphs 3 and 4). Crucially, “these are people who want to be *productive*.” Here is where the producerist discourse first surfaces explicitly: on the denotative level, “productive” refers to the state of engaging in work that materially supports oneself (and one’s family), as well as, perhaps, work that one finds meaningful. But in the connotative dimension activated by the conservative-populist narrative of the speech (and of the broader New Right discourse), “productive” signifies laboring specifically for *self-interest in the private market*. To “produce” means to work, save and invest (as individual market actors), rather than to profligately consume (public services that are enabled through high taxes). In addition, “productive” (and, by extension, “producers”) signifies by extension an opposite “unproductive” or “counterproductive” category (and a set of people who are defined out of the group of producers, and who thus do not “deserve” public provision). Some set of social forces or institutions is keeping workers from being productive, and even perhaps “punishing” them for trying to be productive.

Reagan offers a hint of the answer in the fifth paragraph, where he claims that “in these five years, Federal personal taxes for the average family have increased 67 percent,” even as inflation has eroded purchasing power. Thus, *taxes* are keeping people from being productive (from finding jobs or from saving in order to improve their material status). Indeed, the “ship of state” is “out of control,” leading to an “incomprehensible” “national debt” (paragraph 6). Moreover, “a mass of regulations” is causing inflation and “reduc(ing) our ability to produce.” (paragraph 7) Indeed, the growth rate for “American productivity, once one of the highest in the world, is among the lowest of all major industrial nations.” Thus, the nation’s *producers* have fallen from grace — and from international esteem and leadership — through policies of high *taxes*, *public spending* and *regulations* (to wit, “a virtual explosion in government regulation” [paragraph 47]).

The president emphasizes that “there’s nothing wrong with our internal strengths. There has been no breakdown of the human, technological and natural resources upon which the economy is built” (paragraph 8). Thus, fault lies not with the people (labor), the machines and tools (capital) or the raw materials that drive prosperity. Significantly, these elements are naturalized and constructed as separate from the state: they are “our *internal* strengths,” connotatively signifying a spontaneous (even mystical), homegrown reservoir of diligence, initiative and creativity. There is no suggestion that government investment or regulation itself might have (even since the beginnings of the American state) played a significant role in cultivating these resources. To the contrary, government is presented as a force that has “imposed” regulatory burdens on “the shopkeeper, the farmer, the craftsman, professionals, and major industry” (paragraph 7). In the socioeconomic domain, government (and, as will be shown more clearly below, those who control it) signifies an “external” (as opposed to an “internal”) entity that “imposes” and “punishes” (through policies that

promote inflation and tax productive effort). Reagan pointedly presents “the shopkeeper,” “the farmer” and “the craftsman” first in his list of state victims; these signifiers evoke the mythic, rural-small town American past of competitive, small-scale market entrepreneurship — they are personalized representations of those who grow food, who design and build useful objects, and who sell both — and they also connote *producers* who hold modest levels of wealth and income.

Of course, the president includes (implicitly affluent) “professionals” and (owners, managers) of “major industry” in order to emphasize the classless nature of the economic oppression visited by the state — and of his remedies.<sup>4</sup> “Professionals” here might be thought to signify members of the “New Class” (highly educated, perhaps urban-cosmopolitan “mind workers”), but the key distinction in New Right discourse is that the “professionals” in Reagan’s speech work in the private market (rather than in government, education and research, or nonprofit organizations): these kinds of professionals are also “producers” because they sell useful (e.g. medical, legal, architectural) services, services that are necessary to make the for-profit economy function efficiently and effectively. They are starkly differentiated from the “array of planners, grantsmen, and professional middlemen” (paragraph 22) that Reagan later singles out for sanction as a pathological “creation” of government economic regulation. It is significant that the president chooses “major industry,” rather than “corporations” or even “business” to represent the final member of his cast of government victims. “Industry” signifies hard work, thrift, innovation, factories and — again — production. In popular common sense, “industry” is more likely to activate differentiations from “agriculture” as two laudable manifestations of American economic production; “corporations” or “business” might evoke ideas grounded more in the left-

<sup>4</sup> As Kazin (1995: 263) wrote of Reagan’s populist rhetoric in support of his tax agenda, “it wouldn’t do to call attention to class divisions that could upset the new coalition.”

populism of the late-19<sup>th</sup> century, the Progressive Era and the New Deal, activating oppositions such as “workers,” “labor” or “consumers” inflected with traces of class power that do not sit well with neoliberal-New Right economic and political goals.

Later, the president more conspicuously yokes his proposed tax cuts to the producerist discourse. In paragraph 38, he articulates productivity with the cultural signifier “freedom” by claiming that his plan will “give the American people *room* to do what they do best.” Again, “the people” are constructed outside the state; tax cuts — like cutbacks in economic regulation — will liberate them to fulfill their natural capacities as market actors; this policy will “leave the taxpayers with \$500 billion more in their pockets over the next five years.” (paragraph 41) “More in their pockets” signifies (in the denotative code) not only an increase in individual, private material wealth and income, but a decrease in collective, public wealth and income; if there is more in the “taxpayers’ pockets,” there is less in the state’s (or, as we will see below, in liberal elites’) “pockets.”<sup>5</sup> And again, the Reagan appeal and policy program is articulated outside of economic class power: the tax cut will result in “expand(ed) *national* prosperity” and “increase(ed) opportunities for *all Americans*.”

At the same time — as above in the passage on the regulatory oppression of “the shopkeeper,” “the farmer” and “the craftsman” — the president takes care to stress that his program will especially help traditional “producer” categories like “the family owned farm and the family-owned business” (paragraph 46). Indeed, “the substance and prosperity of our nation is built by wages brought home from the factories and the mills, the farms, and the shops” (paragraph 56); “the source of our strength” to which “the American people” are “ready to return” (paragraph 57) is “the thrift of our people,” “the returns for their risk-taking,” in short, “the production of America.” (paragraph 58). This appeal is right-populist

<sup>5</sup> In Kazin’s (1995: 263) words, “productive Americans, declared the president, should not have to transfer any more of their just rewards to the Goliath state.”

in its signification of humble toilers relying on discipline and ingenuity to make their honest way in the market, and it is neoliberal in its reference to increased freedom for these people to make use of their earnings as they choose: the producers have been led astray because “we’ve removed from our people the decisions on how to dispose of what they created.” (paragraph 59)

But *who* exactly is responsible for the torment of crushing tax burdens and meddlesome regulation visited upon producers? Market capitalism deserves none of the blame for the national disease — it is “a system which has never failed us, but which we have failed through a lack of confidence and sometimes through a belief that we could fine-tune the economy and get it tuned to our liking” (paragraph 9). This “system” again is signified as natural and outside the state; it is those who try to interfere — policy intellectuals, liberal reformers and bureaucrats, Democratic politicians — who have spoiled it. In addition to taxes and spending, they have imposed “unnecessary and unproductive or counterproductive” regulations (paragraph 10). Besides denotatively signifying measures that do no good or that do harm, “*unproductive* or *counterproductive*” culturally evokes the negation and oppression of producers like “the shopkeeper, the farmer, the craftsman.” New Class elites foolishly believed they could use government to reduce undesirable social outcomes of the market (for example, economic inequality or environmental “externalities”) through the demand-management fiscal policies and social regulations of embedded liberalism, but they have only succeeded in stifling “the people.”

Lest this vision of laissez faire capitalism appear harsh to those who are misled by “exaggerated,” “inaccurate” and “unfounded stories” (paragraph 13), the president takes care to emphasize that “we will continue to fulfill the obligations that spring from our national conscience. Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us -- the

poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need -- can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts.” (paragraph 14) This passage introduces a notion that Reagan would frequently rely on in legitimizing his economic program — and one which has long been a staple of New Right social welfare policy discourse: the idea that the ranks of public beneficiaries have unjustly and unwisely been swelled with people who do not need (and, implicitly, do not deserve) assistance. “True need” as a signifier suggests, of course, that there are significant numbers of people who claim “*false needs*” in a bid to receive social assistance. Here, Reagan articulates “true need” with signifiers connoting those with clear material impediments to work in private markets — “the disabled,” “the elderly (or the aged),” “the blind” (paragraph 15) and “the children of low-income families” (at least when it comes to federally subsidized school lunches). He also singles out “veterans pensions” (paragraph 15) to be spared from budget cuts, signifying as truly in need those who *deserve* (see also paragraph 57, “the truly deserving needy”) special appreciation for military service to the nation.

But it is with the signifier “the poverty stricken” that Reagan undertakes the most sophisticated ideological reworking. In paragraph 16, he asserts that “government will not continue to subsidize individuals...where real need cannot be demonstrated.” Again, “government” and “individuals” are articulated here as opposites that lie in completely different spheres, and rather than government “demonstrating” a collective national responsibility to assist “individuals,” it is *individuals* who must “demonstrate” real need. Thus, those who seek government assistance are assumed to be acting in bad faith, to be — like the recipients of \$1.8 billion in food stamp benefits “who are not in real need” (paragraph 23) — “abusing” (paragraph 23) the “national conscience of America.” The Reagan budget included several provisions re-defining “true need” in social provision through strict

financial and lifestyle monitoring (see, e.g., the call to “tighten welfare” and institute “strong and effective work requirements” [paragraph 24]). Thus, despite the layer of anti-state inflections presenting culturally resonant articulations of economic and personal “freedom” for “productive” members of society, here it is actually the *government* that decides who is “truly needy.”

Unlike those who “want to be productive,” for the parasites who lack dignity and self-discipline, work must be “required” or else they will “abuse” the good intentions of the producers. As neoliberal theory and New Right polemics contend, poverty — as well as wealth — is primarily individual and voluntary, rather than socially produced and conditionally determined. The passage is a powerful rearticulation of elements of common sense that had been activated with left-leaning inflections during the New Deal-embedded liberal era: indeed, in this speech and many other public pronouncements, Reagan and his conservative allies and heirs explicitly re-appropriated the social welfare ethos symbolized by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt by claiming that their aim was to return these programs to their “original purpose” (paragraph 24), a goal that has been distorted by New Class collectivist engineering. This passage also illustrates an early intimation of the “neoliberal paternalist” logic — i.e. the use of state power and resources, especially intensive behavioral surveillance, to impose market discipline on the poor — that would be deployed on a larger scale during the 1995-1996 welfare episode (Soss et al. 2009). As with the more sweeping policy provisions and discursive legitimations of welfare reform that I explore in Chapters 6 and 7, intrusive statist measures are necessary to wean “non-productive” elements from public dependency and prepare them to become free and responsible market actors.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> As I argued in Chapter 2, racialized and gendered coding was central to the New Right’s neoliberal anti-welfare state discourse. However, the movement’s political success can be attributed in part to its ability to make such appeals without explicitly espousing racist or sexist doctrines. As Kazin (1995: 262) contrasted the GOP standard-bearer’s message to earlier right-wing appeals, “Reagan cleansed them of all but a modicum of resentment and bitterness, making an ideology that had

“National conscience” — and later, “benevolence” (paragraph 61) — signify a particular ideological conception of social welfare that differs significantly both from New Deal-Great Society ideas and from potentially counter-hegemonic left articulations. These words connote a sense of charity borne of pity, guilt or paternalist indulgence: they suggest a privatized and possessive-individualist ethic that naturalizes a world in which market actors (*homo economicus*) are by definition entitled to all their material advantages (which are assumed to flow entirely from individual skill and tirelessness), but who may *choose* virtuously to allocate a portion of those benefits to those lacking in such skill and diligence (perhaps in part because of accidental disabilities or misfortune). By supporting the Reagan program of conservative economic policy combined with private charitable voluntarism, virtuous producers are in fact choosing to exercise such “benevolence.”<sup>7</sup> Such a top-down vision, which fails to question the power relations on which market transactions are based, may be opposed to an alternative articulation of *solidarity* and *collective obligation*. These signify a community of values and interests, a sense of shared responsibility and destiny, and a recognition that material security is based on a social infrastructure that allows it to flourish (in our historical context, including publicly funded transportation and communication networks, environmental protections and so on). Here, social programs draw their moral

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once sounded extreme appear to be the bedrock of common sense and consensual values.” Indeed, race was never outwardly discussed in any of the New Right political texts or mainstream news stories I examined during the 1981 economic debate, except in a few instances in which civil rights organizations expressed opposition to the Reaganite agenda as, in part, an attack on minorities.

Still, the racialized, gendered and sexualized dimensions of this broad discourse should not be underestimated, and indeed became somewhat more explicit during the welfare reform episode I analyze in Chapters 6 and 7. Reagan himself made a memorable reference to these factors during his 1976 campaign for the GOP presidential nomination, spinning the apocryphal tale of a “welfare queen” from Chicago’s South Side whose annual income exceeded \$150,000: “She has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 Social Security cards and is collecting veterans benefits on four non-existing deceased husbands. And she is collecting Social Security on her cards. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps, and she is collecting welfare under each of her names,” the candidate said. (Gilliam 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the New Right has vigorously promoted corporate- and religiously funded private social service organizations as alternatives to federal programs. Reagan especially singled out the (Mormon) Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints as a model for charitable assistance to the needy (CQ Researcher 1982: 4).



logic from a *public ethic* of mutual duty and an acknowledgement that material “misfortune” can visit anyone.

Reagan extends this narrative in paragraph 18, where he legitimizes deep cuts in public arts and humanities funding by asserting that “the American people” have through “voluntary contributions” financed more such activities than all other countries in the world combined. Here, “voluntary contributions” and “generosity” are articulated against (implicitly “forced”) “Federal subsidies.” This is another dimension of the individualistic market-based populist discourse: people acting in their private capacities (rather than the state acting as a public leviathan) may choose to allocate some of their (individually earned) material resources based on taste and inclination. Arts and cultural organizations will survive in the market by offering products that demonstrate their appeal by drawing “voluntary” support. “Voluntary” signifies “liberty,” articulating this key fragment of popular common sense with private market activity. These cultural significations accomplish ideological work on a number of levels: First, they articulate a policy of public budget cuts with cultural values of freedom and autonomy. In addition, they legitimate a system by which artifacts of socio-political and cultural dissent — aesthetic projects that fail to draw much support from the (white, Judeo-Christian) majority, and/or from affluent and wealthy elements with large amounts of disposable income to contribute — are marginalized. Moreover, in doing this, they discourage cultural challenge to the political-economic power relations on which such an arrangement is founded, while also legitimating the New Right’s defense of moral and cultural traditionalism against the perceived deviancies of the residual New Left and counterculture, which are positioned as favoring a collectivized, statist enforcement of tolerance and social freedom.

In sum, hard-working producers (implicitly, of all socioeconomic classes) are being oppressed by a small group of liberal elites who have distorted the original American values of economic self-reliance, thrift, self-discipline, voluntarism and individual liberty through oppressive taxes, business regulations and public spending. The state has arrayed itself against “the people,” and the New Right in the person of President Reagan will lead us back to “first principles” (paragraph 59) through tax reduction, the lifting of regulations that stifle individual initiative and freedom, and the trimming or elimination of inefficient, “unproductive or counterproductive” public programs. However, there is one major area of spending that the administration will *not* cut, and will, in fact, drastically increase: the military.

Reagan expends substantial ideological energy in this speech to explain how defense programs are fundamentally different from the social and business regulatory spending that has caused so much injustice. In this domain, it is not the perverted American state that is the enemy of the American people, but rather an even more grotesque foreign state that threatens to impose its extreme version of collectivist totalitarianism on the nation — the Soviet Union. For the last decade and more, there has been a dangerous “imbalance” (paragraph 34): this imbalance is signified in the denotative code as that between the Kremlin’s “massive military build-up” and the United States’ dwindling strength, but also connotatively as between weak and ill-funded defense programs, on the one hand, and oppressive and bloated social welfare and business regulatory programs, on the other. Moreover, the “imbalance” of an aggrieved producer as thrifty *homo economicus* struggling against an intrusive and confiscatory social and regulatory state, on the one hand, must be corrected in order for the nation to correct the “imbalance” of an outdated, paltry and morale-sapped national security state struggling against a technologically superior and rapacious foreign juggernaut, on the other hand.

In order to forge these articulations, Reagan signifies military spending as “realistic” (paragraph 35), a budget hike in this area as “needed” (paragraph 32), and the plans for a military build-up as flowing from his “duty as President” which “requires” such an increase (paragraph 34). The need for a buildup should be self-evident — ingrained, indeed, in common sense: “I know that you’re all aware – but I think it bears saying again – that since 1970 the Soviet Union has invested \$300 billion more in military programs than we have.” (paragraph 34).<sup>8</sup> And, despite this large hike in U.S. military spending — which was a major factor in the much-discussed budget deficits of the 1980s, as well as, many analysts argue, the biggest fiscal engine of the (albeit deeply unevenly distributed) economic growth of the decade<sup>9</sup> — the Reagan defense program would be “far less costly” (paragraph 34) than would be a delay in the necessary increases. In fact, Defense Department officials have wisely offered “a number of cuts which reduce the budget increase *needed* to restore our military balance.” (paragraph 32).

In neoliberal theory, military power is one of a few “legitimate government purposes” (paragraph 60, 61) necessary to allow markets to fulfill their naturally beneficent functions, and to protect the market system itself from collectivist annihilation by armed force. On the other hand, as Reagan reiterates immediately following his remarks on military spending, social service and business regulatory programs are characterized by “waste and fraud,” and by “mismanage(ment), constituting a “problem” of “staggering dimensions” (paragraph 36): “Waste and fraud in the Federal Government is...an unrelenting national scandal.” (paragraph 37). Thus, military spending is signified as necessary, realistic and cost-

<sup>8</sup> The basis for the perceived military “imbalance” between the United States and the Soviet Union during the 1970s is complex and contested, but later during the Reagan administration even the CIA declared that earlier estimates of Soviet military expansion during the early 1970s were nearly twice as large as was supported by the evidence (Ferguson and Rogers 1986: 95). Moreover, empirical research suggests that mass media gave much more exposure to such claims and perspectives during the late 1970s and early 1980s than to alternative views. For instance, “by my count, in the 24 months prior to the 1980 election, *Newsweek* carried 57 stories that bore more or less directly on defense spending, 46 of which wholly or predominantly favored greater spending.” (Zaller 1992: 15) See also Ferguson and Rogers (1986: 20).

<sup>9</sup> See Phillips (1990, 2002); Baker (2007).

effective, while social and regulatory spending is articulated with themes of waste, abuse and mismanagement, signifying frivolity, disconnection from reality and fiscal bloat.<sup>10</sup> Toward the culmination of the speech, the president explicitly defines how “the taxing power of government” ought to be deployed: “It must not be used to regulate the economy or to bring about social change.” (paragraph 60). Here, “social change” signifies an attack on the material arrangements and the cultural currents of market-producerism and Judeo-Christian moral values, and a displacement of simplicity, voluntarism and cultural normativity by complexity, collectivist coercion and cultural deviance.

Having thoroughly articulated the substantive rightwing-populist themes that undergird his neoliberal-friendly vision in most of the speech, the president foreshadows the *procedural-populist* currents that are developed more fully in later New Right texts by telling members of Congress that “the people are watching and waiting. They don’t demand miracles. They do expect us to act.” (paragraph 65). Thus, in the recent presidential election the public gave its democratic consent for tax cuts, decreases in social welfare and business regulatory budgets, and hikes in military spending. It is now up to the officials charged with public authority to fulfill the citizens’ transparent will. But a few paragraphs before this passage, the president demonstrates one of the central tensions of the populist New Right-neoliberal ideological articulation — and of its manifestation in mass media coverage: Reagan asserts that his team will “eliminate those regulations that are unproductive and unnecessary *by Executive order where possible.*” (paragraph 51). Just before this passage, Reagan had announced formation of the Cabinet-level Task Force on Regulatory Relief headed by Vice President Bush. Thus, the president is signaling here his administration’s tactical

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<sup>10</sup> In the year before the Reagan domestic budget cuts took effect, combined federal funding for cash welfare, Medicaid, food stamps, low-income housing and school lunch programs was about \$40 billion (CQ Researcher 1982: 7). In contrast, the *increase* alone in military spending that was enacted as part of the 1981 budget act amounted to around half that total.

approach of rolling back the liberal domestic state by administrative rule changes, agency appointments and other unilateral executive branch moves.<sup>11</sup>

Both the American New Right discourse of conservative populism — with its appeals to private voluntarism and producerist economic autonomy — and the broader currents of neoliberal theory and ideology — with its articulation of market liberty with political freedom — make strong philosophical claims on “democracy” as a key element of popular common sense. Yet, as with the neoliberal “reforms” undertaken in other nations under the leadership of financial and policy elites from international economic institutions, banking concerns, universities and think tanks (Harvey 2005), conservative economic and social welfare policy in the American context has been executed with a significant measure of insulation from popular influence. In this speech, the president signifies that consultation and cooperation with Congress — which many argue is the part of the federal government with the strongest democratic warrant — is but a necessary evil. The executive branch, headed by a president chosen through the anti-democratic Electoral College (Dahl 2003) and staffed with thousands of unelected policy experts and administrative personnel (especially beginning in the Reagan era, largely drawn from the ranks of private business), will spearhead “reforms” of economic and social policy over the heads and behind the backs of legislators chosen by a more socially diverse set of constituencies.<sup>12</sup> Here, not only is the neoliberal New Right aggressively using state power to protect and promote private markets — while simultaneously constructing itself, and the market, as *outside of* and *opposed to* the state<sup>13</sup> — but it is relying on the least democratic arms of the government to do so.

<sup>11</sup> These tactics are briefly described in footnote 11 in the last chapter.

<sup>12</sup> As part of this drive, the administration also “launched a broad campaign of nondisclosure and secrecy in the executive branch, and while further institutionalizing business involvement in the promulgation of new regulatory standards, it declined to enforce provisions for public participation.” (Ferguson and Rogers 1986: 132-3).

<sup>13</sup> As Gramsci (2005 [1971]: 160), wrote: “It must be made clear that *laissez-faire* too is a form of State ‘regulation,’ introduced and maintained by legislative and coercive means. It is a deliberate policy, conscious of its own ends, and not the

In a brief post-speech segment, NBC's Roger Mudd outlined the president's tax and budget plans, and promises of job creation and inflation reduction, then asked reporter and economic policy "expert" Irving R. Levine, "is this enough?" This question framed the discussion at the outset not as whether the basic neoliberal-New Right policy directions proposed by Reagan would be wise, fair, effective and so on (which would have opened a potential space for alternative, even potentially counter-hegemonic, articulations), but whether the reductions in social and regulatory spending, increases in military outlays, and cuts in taxes would be sufficiently large and sweeping. In brief interviews with House Budget Committee Chairman Jim Jones and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Robert Byrd, both Democratic leaders made it clear that their caucuses would largely support Reagan's proposals for cuts in regulatory and social spending combined with increases in military programs, though they would seek amendments to the tax plan so it was weighted more toward lower- and middle-income people.

GOP Senator Jesse Helms offered a cautious endorsement of the Reagan speech, asserting that the president's domestic budget cuts did not go far enough: "We're going to find out what the will of the American people is and we're going to find out what the guts of the Congress is. It's just as simple as that," he declared. "We can make all the excuses in the world." These comments evoke a double signification of conservative populism: "will of the American people" suggests a latent popular desire for right-wing policies that is merely waiting for some feckless (implicitly left-leaning) legislators to do their parts to carry it out with fortitude; "will" also connotatively signifies the grit or "stomach" to endure the pain of budget austerity, which presumably will yield beneficial results for everyone in the future. In

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spontaneous, automatic expression of economic facts. Consequently, *laissez-faire* liberalism is a political programme, designed to change — in so far as it is victorious — a State's leading personnel, and to change the economic programme of the State itself — in other words the distribution of the national income."

Helms' statement, the "will of the American people" has yet to be fully formed; it will take elite leadership for this will to be crystallized and become the democratic basis for necessary action.

But at this early stage in the explicit policy discussion — not even a month into Reagan's presidency — news coverage was lending an air of inevitability to the basic shape of the economic plans, and presenting mass opinion as solidly behind New Right goals. Before returning to regular prime-time programming, Mudd notes that "recent public opinion polls" indicate that "most Americans believe Reagan has taken charge of the government and is in command, which is what they found lacking in Jimmy Carter." Mudd says that what "the public" wants to see now is if the president keeps his campaign promises of controlling inflation, cutting federal spending and creating jobs. These comments construct popular opinion as supportive of the administration's policy directions, and suggest that the 1980 election communicated public yearning for a tough leader to shepherd the conservative turn; this is consistent with a populist understanding of the New Right and of Reagan in particular — "the people want" a president who will react against the (implicitly feminized) weakness of Carter and assume control of government not only in a procedural sense ("getting things done" by navigating the institutional pathways of public policymaking), but also in the substantive sense of slashing taxes and domestic spending, while increasing military outlays to project U.S. strength abroad.

Through these significations: 1) masculine, top-down, forthright, aggressive leadership ("command" and "taking charge") as personal qualities of Reagan, are articulated with 2) private market individualism as a basic social values; and with 3) cuts in taxes,<sup>14</sup> rollbacks in business regulation (manifesting, in popular common sense, liberty and the

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<sup>14</sup> As Levine suggested in the post-speech news segment, these tax cuts are to be tilted toward the materially "successful," who hold the keys to rescuing the national economy through their wise saving and investment.

release of entrepreneurial energies), reductions in social spending that breeds anti-producerist dependency, and hikes in military budgets; and finally with 4) national material and (implicitly) moral rebirth. In the entire 11-plus minute NBC News segment, there was no mention of the social impact of the proposed budget cuts (which Helms may have interpreted as “making excuses”), or of the tension between professing the need to downsize government while proposing a historic increase in military expenditures and an aggressive international posture. Viewers are left with a preferred reading that the wisdom of such a budget trajectory is the object of bipartisan (popular and elite) consensus, and that while Democrats may push for a tax plan that would not be so tilted toward the wealthy, the basic desirability of large tax cuts in the Reaganite mold is uncontroversial.

### III. Fulfilling “the People’s Mandate:” Reaganism by Popular Demand

As suggested in the February speech, the Reagan administration and its New Right allies legitimized their neoliberal economic and social welfare policy goals not only through a substantive discourse of right-wing populism — conjuring, through positive ideological mechanisms — a culturally resonant vision of humble producers’ market freedom stifled by a patronizing collectivist elite. They also articulated their desired policies and discursive representations along a parallel dimension that I term a *procedural-populist* narrative. Here, I focus on two Associated Press articles that forcefully express this strand of discourse. These stories, headlined “A Vote For Reagan Was A Vote for Economic Program, Bush Says” and “Bush Says Democratic Leaders Trying to Thwart People’s Mandate,” report on appearances by the vice president surrounding Reagan’s post-assassination attempt address to Congress, which I take up in the next section. These reports illustrate vividly the procedural articulations upon which the administration constructed a democratic warrant for the



upward redistribution of material advantage and political power that its policies inaugurated.<sup>15</sup>

In the first story, circulated April 27, 1981 — the day before Reagan’s historic speech — Bush tells about 1,500 “business leaders” at a Columbia University business school awards dinner that “Congress should pass President Reagan’s economic program because Americans in effect voted for it when they voted for him.” The vice president presents a number of signifiers that position the administration and the New Right in general as noble executors of the public will: for instance, the Reagan tax and budget plan “was tested on the anvil of public opinion in a free election.” “Tested” signifies a concrete connection between these policies and the hard reality of citizen demands, further articulated, through the signifier “anvil,” with the producerist discourse in its connotative associations with physical labor. The Reagan agenda’s fit with “public opinion” — itself a powerful sign of democratic legitimation — was proven unproblematically by measurement against ballots cast in a “free election.” Thus, the people chose transparent policies of economic liberty through transparent mechanisms of political liberty.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Democratic Party economic plans — all of which accepted the basic neoliberal-New Right policy assumptions in which the Reagan program was grounded — “now being put forward in Washington were arrived at in Washington only by a consensus of a limited number of men in a closed room,” the vice president claims. Liberal elites were engaging in top-down policymaking, frustrating the will of the majority of Americans, who freely endorsed the Reagan program by offering “the public’s mandate.” “This was not only the meaning but the hope that was fervently expressed by the American people in the mandate they delivered last November...they were

<sup>15</sup> After his election in 1980, the Heritage Foundation presented Reagan with a monograph filled with detailed policy prescriptions titled *Mandate For Leadership* (Lapham 2004).

<sup>16</sup> “Free election” also invokes the complementary and contrary sign of “fraudulent election,” such as those conducted in Eastern bloc countries in which only Communist Party candidates could win.

voting not simply for a personality or a slogan but for a plan based on these principles (of less taxes and spending) to avert impending economic calamity,” Bush said.

Similarly, in the second report, which ran May 4, the vice president charged the Democratic congressional leadership with actively working to “thwart the mandate of the people” by opposing the administration’s economic agenda. These leaders, Bush says, are exhibiting “a kind of political amnesia as to the meaning of last November’s vote.” House Speaker tip O’Neill, in attempting to subvert Reagan’s “mandate for economic reform, said that sometimes the people don’t really know what’s good for them.” Democratic leaders, who “express the view that politicians know best what’s good for the people,” are “sadly out of touch with the thinking of the American people, and indeed, the new spirit of America,” Bush told an Associated Press-American Newspaper Publishers Association convention.

These stories present sets of binary and opposed signs that position the Reagan administration as champions of populist democracy and tribunes of an aggrieved citizenry. I depict the key signifiers in Table 5-3; again, those in the left column hold a positive valence as aligned with the Reaganite agenda, while those on the right defy or oppose the (popular) conservative cause. Thus, Democratic officials (relying on their urban-cosmopolitan intellectual apologists) haughtily presume knowledge of a public will that in reality was made plain by the results of the 1980 presidential election. Crucially, these officials are not only constructed as in *opposition* to signify petty obstruction of the popular demand, but they are *established leadership in Washington*, signs of the entrenched interests of political power and (implicitly) material advantage (through their conferral of the proceeds from confiscatory taxation on favored “non-productive” constituencies of New Class intellectuals and nonprofit professionals, and undeserving subordinate elements dependent on government benefits). Democrats are enemies of “reform” (economic, and, tacitly, political),

representatives of “the Establishment” (a phrase that in 1981 likely retained strong traces in popular common sense of the protectors of social privilege and conformity that left-leaning 1960s activists opposed). These elites are arrayed against Reagan and his New Right allies: “We have a president who wants to keep his word. I realize that’s a radical concept,” Bush says. As in the February speech, here Reagan is constructed as honest and forthright (like the humble producers whose freedom in private markets he advocates and embodies). The — and, by extension, the New Right in general — is “radical” in that he follows through on promises (unlike the prevaricating and double-dealing Democrats and liberals). But “radical” also signifies a stark policy departure from the oppressive collectivist vision of the New Deal and Great Society, an insurgency against both procedural and substantive elitism.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Bush articulates the elitism of liberal politicians with growing evidence at the time of “the public’s cynicism and lack of confidence in our system.” Thus, declining trust in government and other major social institutions is attributed to top-down policymaking both in the procedural and substantive senses — failing to heed the public will and disconnection from grassroots constituencies, as well as distortion and perversion of the natural market system by government social welfare and economic regulatory programs. Bush’s comments here illustrate one of the central levers of the New Right’s political success and its effectiveness in entrenching neoliberal economic and social welfare policy regimes: the *articulation* of: 1) concrete popular grievances (frustration at government’s inability to ameliorate economic pain and social insecurity), with 2) deeply rooted currents of common sense (centered on distrust of, disgust with and disconnection from politicians, “experts” and officialdom, and resentment at perceived unproductive intrusions into the private

<sup>17</sup> The New Right’s procedural-populist discourse is reminiscent of how, according to historian Gordon Wood, supporters of the Constitution and the market-based political economy it institutionalized “used ‘the most popular and democratic rhetoric available to explain and justify their aristocratic system,’” and “confronted and retarded ‘the thrust of the Revolution with the rhetoric of the Revolution.’” (Matthews 1984: 117)

market realm), with 3) specific policy tools and institutional appeals constructed as plausible solutions to these problems.

Conversely, presumptive opponents of the New Right-Reaganite agenda failed to mount effectively articulated counter-offensives in the major venues of mass communication. Indeed, in the May 4, 1981, AP story, O'Neill answered the vice president's charges of elitism by simply saying, "he's doing a good job. He's a robot, right in line with the party." However supported by empirical evidence this critique may have been — and however effective such messages may have been in constructing the institutional New Right as being at least as bound up with elite establishments as was the Democratic party — such appeals by themselves were unlikely to affect the fabric of mass consent for the Reagan policies as expressed in public opinion polls. These basically procedural-strategic-tactical frames fail to exhibit the depth of social articulation accomplished by New Right voices. Such messages — which, as I demonstrate through my content analytic evidence in the last chapter, formed the bulk of mass media coverage in the Reagan tax and budget policy episode — were more likely simply to confirm audience perceptions (grounded in popular common sense) of politicians as petty partisan infighters, and of public affairs as a game for elites with little place for citizen participation, and little relevance for most people's concrete lived reality.

Significantly, the venues for the vice president's articulations of procedural populism were key sites of hegemonic intellectual-cultural production. His speech at Columbia offered corporate leaders and business school academics plausible democratic justifications for neoliberal policies that, in the main, promoted their material interests and social visions. Indeed, at the dinner Bush received an award for government service. Of course, up to that time his most prominent public position had been as director of the CIA during the Ford

administration, a role that is squarely in line with neoliberal understandings of the legitimate functions of the state. On the other hand, the vice president's address to news industry representatives highlights the mainstream media's somewhat different mode of operation as a hegemonic mechanism whose discursive spaces arguably hold more potential for open political and cultural contestation, and whose social reach is certainly wider. Indeed, it is likely that the White House strategically scheduled Bush's speech as an attempt to influence news coverage following Reagan's April address to Congress.<sup>18</sup> Of course, while the mass media as a whole adheres largely to official government voices and the policy frames they propagate and endorse, it also offers opportunities for oppositional and even potentially counter-hegemonic articulation, particularly if "newsworthy" and "legitimate" sources engage in it. At the least, after being contacted for this story, Democratic elites could have countered Bush's claims with more substantive messages attacking the Reagan policy agenda's socioeconomic effects; if expressed forcefully and consistently, mass media — which is consistently keen to elite conflict — will often broadcast such messages.

Still, the potential space for even this species of officially voiced dissent is limited: first, Democratic elites would have to be willing to make such critiques in the first place; for a complex combination of strategic, institutional and ideological reasons, official partisan opposition to the 1981 Reagan domestic policy agenda was tepid and inconsistent.<sup>19</sup> As (Greider 1982: 114) wrote, "the Democratic alternative was political mimicry...For the working politicians, Reagan's vision had an aura of inevitability." In both AP stories I analyze here, the vice president was — as Greider (1982: 42) reports Budget Director David Stockman's "hunch" about Democratic elites' strategic calculations — constructing the

<sup>18</sup> The Reagan administration's polling, media relations and image-management staff (particularly during its first term) has been widely praised as groundbreaking and masterful (Hertsgaard 1988; King and Schudson 1995).

<sup>19</sup> As a political observer succinctly put it at the time, "Reagan faced off against a disorganized and demoralized Democratic opposition that, lacking leadership and cohesiveness, was unable to develop a coherent policy alternative." (CQ Researcher 1982: 7)

presidential election outcome as a substantive mandate for a dramatic conservative resurgence: “The 1980 election results may not have been ‘ideological,’ but the members of Congress seemed to be interpreting them that way.”<sup>20</sup>

Second, the U.S. media industry — being “relatively autonomous” (Hall 1985) from the state apparatus — has its own imperatives that operate to shape the discourse presented to mass audiences. Thus, some of the conditions that produced this failure of oppositional articulation likely flow from the socially, culturally and politico-economically constructed determinations of mainstream news coverage itself: Bush’s claim of Democratic Party elitism as responsible for popular cynicism and distrust, and O’Neill’s non-substantive retort of lock-step GOP partisanship, were embedded within a largely procedural-strategic-tactically themed story that featured none but official voices arguing about who really speaks — and acts — on behalf of “the people.” The professional narrative formulae that are employed for this type of news story — pegged to a speech by a prominent White House official — likely leave little room for substantive policy contestation, despite the normative dictates of “balance.” Indeed, the parts of the speech that the news dispatch recounts are almost entirely devoid of policy substance; according to the logic of story construction, these assertions call for an equally procedural-strategic-tactical comment in response from a Democratic official.

The implications for the cultivation of mass consent through public opinion polls of this kind of mass media environment are fairly clear: Bush’s strong significations of public

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<sup>20</sup> As Dahl (1990) argued, claims of a democratic mandate for public policy agendas based solely on presidential election results are generally grounded in weak logic and thin evidence. Reagan won 50.9 percent of the popular vote in 1980; the turnout was about 52 percent of eligible voters (which at the time was the lowest since 1948), which means that the Republican ticket attracted the votes of about 26 percent of the eligible electorate. And voting rates in U.S. elections are consistently lowest among lower-income constituencies, so the composition of the electorate is skewed by socioeconomic status. Moreover, surveys indicated that Carter was favored among nonvoters 51 percent to 37 percent (Piven and Cloward 2000: 11). Still, “long considered the spokesman of the ‘extreme’ wing of the Republican Party, Reagan was suddenly seen as representing the mainstream of American opinion.” (CQ Researcher 1982: 6)

support for the Reagan policy agenda — with their florid appeals to democracy that likely primed culturally resonant fragments of common sense — depicted in combination with the lack of articulated substantive policy criticism in the report, were well-positioned to solidify polling results favorable to the administration. In any case, stories like these (of which there were many during debate over the 1981 tax and budget plans), almost certainly had no appreciable effect on *undermining* popular support for the Reagan agenda as expressed in polls. The discursive terms of the public policy discussion — manifested in concrete media coverage as a strong tilt toward neoliberal-New Right voices and powerfully articulated frames, embedded in a non-substantive elite spectacle grounded in news industry imperatives — arguably produced something quite apart from the democratic “great debate” that Bush depicted in his speech to corporate leaders.

#### **IV. “A Setting Hollywood Couldn’t Have Matched:” Calling Forth the People’s Wrath**

These twin themes of substantive and procedural conservative-populism were powerfully articulated and symbolically condensed in the president’s April 28, 1981, address to a joint session of Congress, and in news coverage that followed it. This was Reagan’s first major public appearance since being wounded nearly a month earlier by the apparently fame-obsessed John Hinckley Jr., and the president’s customary presidential “honeymoon period” of favorable media coverage was probably extended by the assassination attempt and by a return to public life that many observers deemed triumphant. Reagan’s speech recapitulated the substantive right-wing populist narrative he had developed in the February address, and further articulated these signs with evocative elements of the procedural-populist discourse that his vice president voiced in the two newspaper stories I analyze in the last section. Moreover, the performative aspects of the address — which were emphasized in succeeding

media commentary — illustrate vividly the non-substantive elite spectacle that characterized much news coverage of the 1981 tax and budget episode in general.

Reagan's 27-minute speech was staged to coincide with his 99<sup>th</sup> day in office, just before the proverbial 100-day mark that since FDR has signified presidents' initial window of policy opportunity, and White House officials scheduled the address to give a major boost to the prospects for the tax legislation, as well as to project a healthy and robust president ready to wade back into the policy fray after several weeks quietly directing it from the sidelines. Sporting a beaming smile, Reagan entered the House chambers to a standing ovation that lasted more than three minutes. CBS News National Correspondent Bob Schieffer, who anchored coverage of the broadcast, began to frame the address in strategic-tactical and performative terms immediately, telling audiences as Reagan greeted members of Congress on his way to the podium, "as you can see, the president, in a word, looks terrific." Schieffer noted the speech's "dramatic setting," and offered that "it's only natural, I suppose, that there'll be as much interest in how the president looks tonight and how he sounds as in what he has to say."

President Reagan began the body of his speech by cataloging the nation's economic ills: continued double-digit inflation, high mortgage interest rates, unemployment, declining real wages, and mounting business failures (paragraph 6). He then laid down the populist gauntlet on an aggressive policy response to these material conditions: "*The American people now want us to act and not in half-measures,*" he declared. "*They demand and they've earned a full and comprehensive effort.*" (paragraph 7) Here, the president begins to articulate the procedural-populist narrative by casting "the American people" as the democratic force behind the neoliberal-New Right concoction of supply-side tax cuts, reductions in social and business regulatory programs, and large hikes in military spending: "the people" not only



passively support these plans, they actively “demand” them, signifying a widespread and strident popular uprising in support of the Reagan agenda. The president admonishes remaining skeptics in Congress to heed the clear will of the nation: “*the message of last November 4<sup>th</sup>*” is “very simple. Our government is too big, and it spends too much.” (paragraph 8) Thus, Reagan articulates material grievances and frustration, with mass political demand as the sign of democracy, and with conservative policy responses. He also constructs the public will specifically as a desire to downsize government: the signs of simplicity, popular sentiment and market individualism are connotatively articulated against those of complexity, elite worldviews and collectivized statism as symbolized by liberal Democrats.

After praising the “bipartisan” cooperation he has received from most members of Congress, Reagan warns legislators that “it may appear that we have two alternatives. In reality, however, there are no more alternatives left.” (paragraph 11) The president refers to the substitute legislation proposed by House Democrats — which called for smaller cuts in domestic spending and smaller increases in military outlays, along with a smaller tax cut targeted more at lower- and middle-income people — as “the committee measure.” (paragraph 12) As in Bush’s comments in the AP stories above, this signifier constructs that alternative policy direction as the top-down imposition of liberal elites (sitting on an insular and biased congressional committee), as opposed to the Reagan program, which stems from popular “demand” and is a “bipartisan” measure. “Bipartisan” here signifies administration policy as a consensus approach not geared toward narrow interests, positioned to “cure the hardship, anxiety and discouragement” that past liberal overreach “has imposed on the American people.” (paragraph 12) Again, Reagan asserts that his favored military spending increases are “essential” and “required to restore America’s national security” (paragraph 12)

in order to “build a national defense second to none.” (paragraph 11) His plan will cut “the tax burden” and “control government spending” (paragraph 11), rather than “balance the budget on the taxpayer’s back.” (paragraph 12) In contrast, the bill supported by Democratic elites will simply continue the policies that created economic distress: it is “an echo of the past rather than a benchmark for the future.” (paragraph 12)

Thus, the signs of popular demand, novelty, simplicity and clarity (e.g. “the common sense that characterizes the people of this country” [paragraph 15]), control (of public spending and taxation), and economic renewal, on the one hand, are opposed to those of elite imposition and “burden,” “predictable patterns of old economic practices” (paragraph 20), complexity and the “fog” of skeptical policy analysis (paragraph 13), government profligacy and economic calamity. The “people” are rising up for redress of their grievances, calling for politicians to “stop feeding (government) growth.” (paragraph 13) Indeed, “government spending has been growing faster than the economy itself.” (paragraph 13) Thus, the state — signified as an artificial imposition in polar opposition to natural private markets — evokes the image of a ravenous beast that must lose “its high spending diet.” (paragraph 13) Reagan and his neoliberal-New Right allies will slay that beast on behalf of the people, brightening “our economic future.” (paragraph 18) However, the people — rightly recognizing the beneficent and protective role of the state in the face of brutal foreign enemies — also desire military supremacy, and acknowledge its “necessity,” as opposed to the damaging luxuries of social service and economic regulatory programs. Thus, government in its capacity as armed enforcer of order and aggressive projector of national greatness is positively signified, while government as redistributor of material rewards and social status more equitably is negatively signified (Diamond 1995: 9).

Reagan amplifies the procedural-populist narrative and articulates it with substantive themes of producerism in asserting, “when I took the oath of office, I pledged loyalty to only one special interest group — ‘We the People.’ Those people — neighbors and friends, shopkeepers and laborers, farmers and craftsmen — do not have infinite patience.” (paragraph 19) Thus, the president articulates New Right policy prescriptions with the common interest, and with the popular will of producer constituencies that signify the traditional American myth of small-scale laissez faire capitalism. In this passage, he also deftly reappropriates a bygone Republican president’s own right-wing populist articulations, quoting Theodore Roosevelt’s admonition that “the American people are slow to wrath, but when their wrath is once kindled, it burns like a consuming flame.” In a warning to liberal elites who selfishly stand in the way of the return to pre-New Deal origins, Reagan says, “well, perhaps that kind of wrath will be deserved if our answer to these serious problems is to repeat the mistakes of the past.”<sup>21</sup> Here, the president as advocate of the people in their capacity as market actors calls forth their righteous indignation on the patronizing elite establishment with its tired collectivist notions and haughty over-intellectualism.

Roosevelt invoked the people’s “wrath” in his first speech to Congress following President William McKinley’s assassination by a self-professed anarchist revolutionary. McKinley was one of the most pro-business presidents in American history; he was bitterly opposed by left-populist farmer groups and labor unions, and he was killed by an apparent anti-capitalist advocate of a species of radical non-authoritarian socialism. The address that Reagan speechwriters pulled this quote from is filled with angry denunciations not only of violent insurrection, but of radical political discourse attributed to culturally deviant

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<sup>21</sup> As Treasury Secretary Donald Regan said, “we’re not going back to high-button shoes and celluloid collars. But the President does want to go back to many of the financial methods and economic incentives that brought about the prosperity of the Coolidge period.” (Phillips 2002: 333)

foreigners: McKinley was “the embodiment of the popular will of the nation” and his democratic legitimacy was as authentic as that conferred by a New England town meeting; left-anarchist thought and activism is worse than the slave trade, and represents the lowest form of criminality. Roosevelt calls for restrictive immigration laws to target those with un-American ideas, and warns of a future wave of violent anarchist insurrection, which will necessitate the marshaling of the nation against “even active or passive sympathizers.”

(History News Network 2001)

Thus, Reagan articulates his conservative ideas positively with the sign of Roosevelt — who, like the 40<sup>th</sup> president, reveled in his rough-hewn, cowboy image — but who, on issues of corporate regulation and environmental protection, was probably the most liberal GOP president of his era, and whose policies against business monopolies and for the public protection of wilderness run deeply counter to the neoliberal-New Right tide. But the president inserts himself into a particular Roosevelt speech that is a past incarnation of right-wing populist discourse, glorifying the imposition by the state of cultural order and political orthodoxy. In drawing this comparison, Reagan tacitly equates the “New Class” elites and Democratic chieftains who control, nurture and defend the behemoth social welfare and business regulatory state in the alleged interests of lower-status constituencies, on the one hand, with working-class anarcho-socialists who attacked, denounced and sought to overthrow the behemoth national security and corporate “ruling class” state, again in the alleged interests of lower-status groups, on the other. In a curious reversal, liberal elites are signified as the worst class of criminals (even worse than slave traders), who betray their alleged constituencies with false statist doctrines, just as the left-anarchists at the turn of the century despicably betrayed their alleged constituencies with false anti-statist doctrines. Thus, the juxtapositions in this passage suggest a tacit equation between the enemies of “the

people” symbolized by McKinley’s assassin and his radical sympathizers, on the one hand, and the enemies of “the people” symbolized by liberal elites opposed to the New Right program, on the other. The effect of such an articulation (if not the conscious intent of the speechwriters) was to set Reagan up as a populist hero who had bravely defied an assassin’s bullet, to equate popular wrath at McKinley’s killer with popular wrath at the obstructers of neoliberal economic policy, to symbolically collapse liberal opponents into McKinley’s assassin and his sympathizers, and to further condense these into Hinkley, who, by his explicit absence in the speech, presents an imposing figure in the background as Reagan’s — and the nation’s — vanquished enemy.

The climax of the address featured a contradictory reference to an American literary icon. The president began his final passage with: “The poet Carl Sandburg wrote: “The republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless first a dream.”” Reagan then implicitly articulated his (self-evidently popular) policy directions with an American-exceptionalist striving toward the future: the signifiers “a new spirit;” “a higher goal;” “courageous and determined, unafraid and bold;” “a new course;” “reach beyond the commonplace;” “much greatness before us;” “faith;” and “that dream will come true” are juxtaposed with “restore our economic strength and build opportunities like one we’ve ever had before.” This passage continues the conservative-populist narrative of moving forward by a return to pure national origins: economic self-reliance, military strength, social and cultural order. Thus, the people, embodied in the sign of Carl Sandburg, will impel their representatives to return to the laissez faire principles that created American greatness.

In popular common sense, Sandburg (who had been the subject of a commemorative stamp in 1978), signifies a rough patriotism; the progress of American industry, commerce and agriculture; humble Midwestern (i.e. “middle American”) origins;

plain-spokenness and simplicity; uneducated folk lyricism; innocence (as the author of beloved children's books); and freedom itself (having penned a prize-winning biography of Lincoln, himself a populist [and GOP] icon). The quote is taken from the poem "Washington Monument by Night," which recalls the improbable victory by the ragtag revolutionary troops at Valley Forge. These signs forge effective articulations with both the New Right's procedural- and its substantive-populist discursive currents: they connect with the plight of the humble, patriotic, individualistic producer beset by the collectivist oppressions of a liberal state, and with the promise of democratic political action (the people's "wrath") as an enforcement mechanism to bring the nation back to its primordial social principles and practices. In historical experience, however, Sandburg is considerably more complex: politically, he was unmistakably an advocate of the populist left in one form or another, and was an energetic participant in radical activism in his early years (for example, writing newspaper articles in support of the International Workers of the World, serving as an aide to the socialist mayor of Milwaukee from 1910 to 1912, and enduring government surveillance in the wave of repression that surrounded World War I). Later, he was an ardent New Dealer and vocal supporter of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>22</sup> In short, his ideas embodied many of the ideological currents that the emergent neoliberal-New Right "insurgency" was reacting *against*.

On the whole, Reagan's post-assassination speech to Congress was a skillful articulation of substantive right-wing populism with a kind of procedural populism calling on the people to fulfill their democratic duties to impel policy action from a recalcitrant liberal elite. It blended the pro-market producerist discourse (whose signs of industry, thrift, self-discipline and economic individualism evoke deep currents of American popular

<sup>22</sup> See the biographical and historical assessments in "Modern American Poetry: Radical Sandburg." Available at: [http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s\\_z/sandburg/radical.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/s_z/sandburg/radical.htm).

common sense) with references to populist democracy, positioning Reagan (and his New Right allies) as tribunes of the common folk, ready to marshal the people's righteous anger in support of supply-side tax reductions, cuts in business regulation and social spending, and large increases in the military budget. America's movement into a prosperous and wholesome future of national greatness through a return to its founding values and practices — which was developed most explicitly and forcefully in the February speech — was here embodied in the sign of a miraculously vigorous president whom even an assassin's bullet could not fell. This narrative was further articulated with signs of procedural-populism — Reagan and his New Right allies were (like William McKinley, who was martyred by a crazed radical professing false sympathy with the oppressed classes) authentic representatives of the popular will, signifying a call for righteous citizen-producers to lobby Congress in support of the president's economic plan. Allusions to two key American cultural icons — Teddy Roosevelt and Carl Sandburg — effectively obscured historical complexities to connect a conservative policy agenda to signs of populist-democratic self-assertion, national progress, liberty and common prosperity.<sup>23</sup> Thus, a policy agenda that was positioned to drastically redistribute income, wealth, social status and political power upward was married to a populist discourse that at once evoked in common sense the anti-tax revolutionaries of 1776; the antebellum yeoman farmer, merchant and “free” laborer; the suburban middle-class insurgents of the contemporary “tax revolt;” and the associated libertarian “tax rebels” who during the late 1970s and early 1980s refused to file tax returns or submitted “protest returns,” claiming that the federal income tax was unconstitutional.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> As Barthes (1972 [1957]: 142-3) argued, “myth” operates ideologically to naturalize and eternalize in taken-for-granted concepts the complex contingencies of history: myth is “the privation of history.” (ibid: 151)

<sup>24</sup> On the latter, see the April 7, 1981, Associated Press story headlined “The Tax Rebels I: Patriots or Outlaws?” in which former Internal Revenue Service Commissioner Donald Alexander warned that the Reagan administration's drastic cuts in the IRS budget could give such far-right tax protesters the upper hand.

In short, the April address was a *performance* geared to energize the righteous anger of (certain) subordinate groups on behalf of a hegemonic project closely aligned with the emerging neoliberal capitalist order — and by many measures, it was an effective performance. Reagan’s speech was interrupted by applause more than 10 times, with the most rousing response — featuring a standing ovation replete with hoots and whistles — drawn by his assertion that, “Congress knows *the old way* is no longer acceptable.” Indeed, the address was said to generate thousands of letters, calls and telegrams from energized Reagan supporters imploring their legislators to back the populist icon’s plans for economic renewal — although we know now that many of these constituent communications were less than spontaneous (Greider 1982; Hertsgaard 1988; King and Schudson 1995: 145).<sup>25</sup>

In the April 29, 1981, Associated Press story headlined “A Setting Hollywood Couldn’t Have Matched,” Special Correspondent Walter R. Mears represents Reagan’s address to Congress as a highly effective elite spectacle, but offers no substantive critique. Wryly playing on the president’s former acting career, the report deploys the trope of a movie set to construct the speech as a political show: with its plot of a beloved national leader triumphantly returning from an assassination attempt, “the performance was a guaranteed hit;” Reagan was “the leading man” facing “the glare of television lights;” “the scene was standard.” As Mears writes, “in circumstances like those Tuesday night, an amateur would have been a star. And Reagan is a pro.”

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<sup>25</sup> In post-speech news coverage, CBS’s Schieffer said that the purpose was for the president to “make his pitch,” and offered that there “was a lot of emotion, quite a dramatic setting there.” Reporters Phil Jones and Leslie Stahl supplied almost entirely procedural-strategic analyses, framing the speech in battle terms as a “victory” and suggesting that it would provide the political momentum the White House sought for its economic agenda. There was barely a trace of substantive policy discussion — let alone space for potential critics, even Democratic elites, to counter New Right messages — with journalists analyzing the Reagan address (largely favorably) *as a performance*, as simply a particularly effective example of the unproblematic presidential tactic of “going public” in order to shape public opinion and pressure congressional opponents (Kernell 1986). Coverage did not question the substance of the popular democratic warrant for policy action that Reagan had claimed: smiling commentator Bruce Morton compared the speech with addresses by former President Carter, opining the conventional wisdom that unlike the former Hollywood actor, Reagan’s predecessor “wasn’t very good on television.”



To be sure, the news story openly acknowledges the speech as a spectacle staged to gin up political momentum for the Reagan tax and budget agenda (part of “the effort to sell his proposals”), even exploiting its performative aspects as a rhetorical device. But beyond a cynical tone suggesting that spectacles like these are to be expected, the report offers no critical analysis of the normative dimensions of such tactics, and certainly no substantive empirical evidence or historical background that might call into question the cultural themes and the policy logic on which the speech was based. In popular common sense, the signifiers “setting,” “Hollywood,” “performance,” “leading man,” “star” and “drama” are more likely to connote fame, luxury, glamour, skill, sophistication, charisma and the affable charm often attributed to Reagan, than they are to fuel skepticism about the veracity or sincerity of the president’s discourse: after all, every sane person acknowledges — and tacitly endorses — the fiction of cinema, and under the dominant code in which the AP analysis is operating, it would make as much sense to analyze the president’s speech along these substantive dimensions as it would to subject the myths of film to critical scrutiny according to their correspondence with the concrete lived reality and sentiments of the actors. Yes, presidential speeches are for show, but that is not “news.”

While this 807-word story communicates almost no substantive policy content — and no substantive criticism or dissent, in the voice of the correspondent, of Democratic elites or anyone else — its likely implications for public opinion on the Reagan agenda are favorable. It constructs the president as skilled, self-assured and competent, as a cowboy “riding high” in public surveys; it uncritically repeats Reagan’s assertions that “the people” are on his side, and articulates the broad outlines of the tax and budget plans with the notion of inevitability. Fulfilling the professional journalistic obligation to portray (elite, preferably dramatic) conflict, the story does claim that Reagan “probably will have to compromise later

on his three-year, 30 percent tax reduction plan, although there is no sign of that now.” But the “compromise” would be, in the end, minimal. And the report resorts to procedural-strategic analysis in claiming that the budget plan faces “a long legislative road ahead” and the “opposition will try to rally” in drafting individual appropriations bills. But while there was some substantial logrolling to come on the budget plan, its basic outlines — deep cuts in social programs and business regulation, large increases in military spending — would remain unchanged.

Mainstream news media’s propensity to accentuate dramatic partisan conflict (however slight in substance) represents an economic imperative to attract audiences who are presumed to be bored by staid policy discussion or depictions of consensus. But it also signifies ideologically that the political system is working as designed, manifesting the professional norm of “presumed democracy” (Bennett 1993b) and the code of “normalization” (Bennett 2009 [1983]). In common sense, Democrats and Republicans always disagree stridently and fundamentally, and while this creates some systemic tension when it leads to cynicism and extreme disconnection from the contentious dimensions of politics (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002), it also reassures us that we live in a nation with a free and open mode of governance — if anything, there is too much disagreement, but at least discourse, opinion and policy direction are vigorously contested and wildly diverse.

In this AP story, the narrative of elite spectacle plays back on itself in several layers: 1) the report focuses on a speech in which the government’s top official (not incidentally, a former actor), addressing a chamber full of other political elites, in both substantive and procedural terms claims a grassroots popular democratic warrant for his favored policies; 2) the story recognizes the speech itself as a staged event, but analyzes it only through such a strategic-performative prism, self-consciously deploying movie industry signifiers yet

naturalizing and normalizing the image of political speeches as entertaining theater; and 2) in its dominance by official voices and procedural-strategic-tactical frames, the report depicts politics itself as a dramatic show and an inside game, with seemingly no connection to the daily realities and life prospects of the “common people” whom the president so floridly evoked as on the side of the neoliberal-New Right ascendance. The Reagan administration put on a show for the television audience; the TV networks circulated this performance — and collaborated in its immediate production — then analyzed it unproblematically and uncritically as a performance; newspaper articles did the same, only with a more wry and slightly cynical tone. The contemporary mainstream media’s professionally socialized injunction against anything that would appear to not be “objective” or neutral from a partisan or ideological standpoint collides with its self-image and normative role as a protector of democracy and unveiler of the pretenses of the powerful to produce commentaries such as these (Hallin 1994; King and Schudson 1995; Lawrence 2000): superficially critical but lacking analytical depth and the presentation of the substantive alternative policy perspectives prized in the classical-liberal press model of “the marketplace of ideas.”

#### **V. Policy Triumph: Collaring the Liberal Dogs**

These currents of right-wing populist discourse inscribed through elite spectacle in speeches and news coverage culminated in network TV depictions of Reagan’s signing ceremony for the tax bill on August 13, 1981. Coverage of the event, held at the president’s Rancho del Cielo, California, compound, featured verbal and visual significations of middle American producerism rebelling against the overweening collectivist state in the name of economic liberty. Emphasizing strategic and tactical dimensions, television news acknowledged the ceremony’s elite staging, but also participated actively in its discursive and

practical construction, ignoring non-official sources and policy perspectives, and avoiding traces of criticism in Reagan's moment of policy triumph.

*ABC World News Tonight* began with anchor Frank Reynolds' introduction, as he sat in the studio against a backdrop dominated by a photo of a smiling Reagan. The camera turns to a shot of a rustic homestead nameplate, emblazoned with "The Reagans" and an engraving of a horse. The audience perspective then shifts to what appears to be a fog-shrouded corral, with reporter Sam Donaldson introducing viewers to the "Reagan dogs and horses" as the camera pans to a shot of First Lady Nancy Reagan, decked out in cowgirl regalia, attempting to collar an over-excited canine. Here is when the audience gets its first glimpse of the president, dressed in a denim suit, his wide Western-style shirt collar open and tie-less, sporting cowboy boots and an oversized belt buckle. Reagan is behind a desk placed in the corral, signing the tax legislation with multiple ceremonial pens, sitting next to a grey-haired man — perhaps a ranch-hand — wearing a John Deere baseball cap. The camera then shifts to the same recorded shot of Mrs. Reagan trying to control the dog, and the first lady is overhead telling the recalcitrant animal, "the bill's passed — you can't do anything about it now."

The horse-emblazed nameplate, corral, animals, cowboy duds and ranch-hand proudly displaying his farm equipment loyalties signify elements of the conservative producerist discourse: "middle American" simplicity, social informality and cultural tradition, the wide-open ethereal beauty and mystical promise of the Western frontier, manual labor and economic self-reliance. In the New Right code, these signs are connotatively opposed to those of the culturally sophisticated (and, by construction, decadent) elite Eastern establishment: the "mind-workers" of the liberal New Class with their complex schemes of bureaucratized economic collectivism hatched in dank, charmless offices. Reagan as a

persona is signified as relaxed and easygoing (rather than tense and self-consciously serious) — Donaldson says he “seemed in an upbeat mood today, answering questions with the confidence sometimes lacking in the past” — joking with the throng of journalists and cheerfully showing off his boots. Donaldson even inserts himself into the news narrative, asking, “how much will you take for the place?” with the president replying, “oh, you can’t sell Heaven.” Mrs. Reagan is shown hopping a corral fence, as Donaldson notes, “even his wife Nancy (is) entering into the spirit of the country atmosphere.”

The first lady’s tongue-in-cheek likening of her boisterous dog to a political opponent, followed by Donaldson’s segue into the president’s impromptu news conference — “with the dogs restrained...” — signifies congressional Democrats (muted though their substantive critique of the New Right agenda may have been) and left-of-center non-governmental advocates (nearly invisible in the overall news discourse) as overexcited animals. These critics have been tamed by the Reagan cowboys, their hysterical carping about economic inequity, social obligation and dubious fiscal arithmetic disciplined by the self-assured simplicity of the new conservative regime, with its promise of a bright future based on traditional American virtues of economic freedom and hardy self-reliance.

With the tax and budget legislation dispatched, Reagan addresses other matters on the neoliberal-New Right agenda, highlighted by the federal air-traffic controllers strike and subsequent lockout, and recent criticism from Soviet officials of the administration’s plans to develop a neutron warhead. As the president asserts that the neutron bomb was to be “a defensive weapon,” the ABC camera pans to a child playing with what appear to be toy horses in the corral dirt. Reagan proclaims that Soviet leaders are “squealing like they’re sitting on a sharp nail” because someone is finally matching their ominous military escalation. On the air-traffic controllers walkout, the president twice accuses workers —

whom he had permanently sacked earlier that month — of “break(ing) their oaths and break(ing) the law,” and asserts that the administration’s decision to replace them with military personnel means that “we are rebuilding the system.” In addition to being fired, the controllers would face criminal prosecution for violating anti-strike laws that had rarely been enforced in recent decades. The administration’s actions here would change the normative order for labor-management relations throughout the public- and private-sector economy, implicitly endorsing increasing moves to fire strikers and intensify other anti-union practices, and suppressing residual organized labor assertiveness from the post-New Deal era and earlier (Harvey 2005; Baker 2007).<sup>26</sup>

Thus, Reagan (and his allies) are signified as “confidently” confronting power-hungry adversaries foreign and domestic (these enemies are animalistic — they are mindless dogs on the domestic front, pigs that eat garbage and let out unmanly “squeals” in the case of the Soviets). He is a masculine hero of the American West, defending economic and political liberty, protecting the innocence of childhood from brutal totalitarian aggression, fighting back against “special interest” constituencies who transgress the legal order of labor-management discipline (key to the neoliberal use of state power to promote property rights), and thus endanger public safety. As Donaldson told viewers at the close of the news segment: “The picture here was one of warmth and joviality, with dogs and children and good-natured kidding around, but the words that mattered today from the president were cold and unyielding, as he continued his hard line toward the air-traffic controllers, and

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<sup>26</sup> According to a report in a left-of-center economic affairs journal at the time, the administration’s reaction to the strike was “an ominous signal that a new era of overtly anti-union politics is beginning in Washington.” The immediate origins of the dispute lay in a work speed-up that resulted from airline deregulation in 1978, as the government attempted to get more commercial and corporate traffic flowing. Angry with the Carter administration’s aggressive stance, the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Association had endorsed Reagan in the 1980 election amidst the GOP candidate’s promises to improve working conditions. However, the new administration reacted more aggressively than the Carter administration had planned to in the event of a strike, immediately firing more than 11,000 controllers when they refused to return to the job after a 48-hour period. The administration also imposed anti-union policies and practices on the replacement controllers, including extracting signed pledges against participation in labor actions (Dollars and Sense 1981).

particularly, toward the Soviet Union.” Statist economic control, socio-cultural disorder, recklessness and aggression are thus signified against economic liberty, socio-cultural discipline, careful deliberation and “peace through strength.” These dueling significations are articulated on screen with personalized depictions of Reagan as a producer-hero, releasing the American energies of simple diligence and entrepreneurialism through the new tax policy. As Kazin (1995: 262) wrote of Reagan’s brand of right-wing populist discourse, “he gave Americanism a fresh prominence and optimistic meaning; it was the natural creed of plainspeaking, industrious citizens who were capable of improving their lot without government assistance.”

As in coverage of the president’s April address to Congress, reporters in TV stories on the tax legislation ceremony signal that they *know* the event is an elite spectacle, constructed strategically to present a set of cultural and political images to viewers (King and Schudson 1995: 145-47). Journalists comment openly on the atmospherics of the rustic setting: for example, CBS reporter Leslie Stahl notes the stark visual difference between the event and “the usual White House signing ceremonies.” But media workers simultaneously actively participate in constructing this spectacle:<sup>27</sup> in a seeming violation of the professional codes of objectivity and neutrality that likely would be overlooked because of its apparent non-partisan and non-ideological character, Donaldson directly contributes to the narrative by joking with Reagan in the folksy populist idiom the New Right has cultivated. Moreover, the networks select camera shots and angles — cowboy regalia, rustic nameplates, animals and children.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Indeed, it was during the Reagan administration that the term “photo op” — with its connotations of media-government collaboration and complicity — came into widespread use (King and Schudson 1995).

<sup>28</sup> CBS’s story on the ceremony, though a bit shorter than its competitor’s version, features many of the same images, carrying the same significations in popular common sense. CBS does add a shot of a rustic horse-head carving on a stump, a long face-shot of Nancy in her cowboy hat, and a shot of the president and first lady cheerfully waving goodbye to the media.

These dimensions point to what Robinson (1984) terms the “facticity” and “actuality” of TV news accounts: the very quality of being a visual-oral (rather than a written) medium, along with the self-conscious codes and practices of production, combine to create the impression of a one-to-one correspondence between image and objective experience in real time. Even if the details of journalists’ comments betray an acknowledgement of the show-business character of a political event, they rarely reveal their own roles in constructing the mediation of that event. Scholars have theorized that such dimensions might increase television’s power to shape audiences’ political and cultural perceptions; by its very conventions, TV news arguably has the unique ideological potential to obscure the immediate social conditions of its own production and circulation, in addition, of course, to the larger material conditions in the broader political economy that make this media, and the phenomena it covers, possible (Messaris and Abraham 2001; Hall 1979 [1977]).

Neither TV story on the tax legislation signing includes any substantive policy messages (other than unattributed statements that it will result in a tax reduction). And these reports communicate no opposition to the Reaganite-New Right agenda in any of its facets (unless one includes the reported comments by Soviet officials); reporters do not mention the “Solidarity Day” march planned for the following month, organized by left-of-center nongovernmental groups in opposition to the administration’s tax, social welfare, civil rights and business regulatory policies.<sup>29</sup> This texture of story construction serves to further foreground and naturalize the subtle ideological dimensions evinced by the right-wing populist articulations in Reagan’s words, dress and ranch setting.

<sup>29</sup> See the July 29, 1981, Associated Press story headlined “NAACP Plans March on Washington in September,” which reports Reagan’s speech to the civil rights organization’s annual convention. The NAACP endorsed a resolution characterizing the New Right as a “movement (that) represents the undertow of a rising tide of anti-poor and anti-black behavior by public officials, politicians, major institutions and private citizens.”



Public opinion poll results are shaped — and thus, mass consent for hegemonic visions and material arrangements are signaled — in part through the repeated reception of clusters of ideologically articulated signifiers (verbal and visual messages) that resonate culturally with fragments of popular common sense and are internalized through framing and priming mechanisms. This discourse has its most psychologically powerful — and politically potent — effects when alternative articulated significations do not circulate frequently in major venues of mass communication. My evidence in this chapter and the previous one demonstrates that such was largely the case during the 1981 Reagan budget and tax policy episode.

## **VI. “No More Alternatives Left”? Counter-Hegemonic Visions**

But were potentially counter-hegemonic articulations — discursive links between material conditions, social identities, culturally resonant dimensions of popular common sense, and tax and budget policy — available in public discourse around the time of institutional debate on the Reagan economic agenda? Perhaps mass media cannot be expected to include critical sources and to circulate dissenting perspectives if such perspectives are not voiced by actors inside or outside government. I explore this question in a final segment of critical semiotic analysis, examining the discourse of a left-of-center social movement organization in relation both to New Right perspectives, and to the messages of New Deal-Great Society embedded liberalism that my analysis in the last chapter shows were sporadically circulated by media through mainstream elite voices of the national Democratic Party.

On April 25, 1979, the New York Local of the Democratic Socialist Organizing Committee and the Institute for Democratic Socialism sponsored a debate between author-activist and political scientist Michael Harrington and GOP Rep. Jack Kemp, co-sponsor of

the Kemp-Roth supply-side tax bill that was the blueprint for the Reagan administration's 1981 plan. This exchange, moderated by *New York Times* economic columnist Leonard Silk, illustrates key ideological themes as differently articulated by the neoliberal-New Right, the center-left national Democratic mainstream, and left-wing nongovernmental groups that shared several policy positions with the latter, but differed fundamentally on many others. My empirical analysis indicates that such left perspectives — especially as they departed from elite Democratic understandings and positions — were not expressed in mainstream news coverage of the Reagan plan. In this section, I also refer to an April 29, 1981, Heritage Foundation policy paper on domestic spending cuts as a complement to Kemp's messages, which focus more directly on tax policy.<sup>30</sup>

Harrington makes clear from the outset his agreement with Kemp and the New Right that the Keynesian “demand-management” response to economic policy, dominant since the 1930s, was no longer effective in the current historical context: domestic and international socioeconomic conditions had changed, calling for a new approach. As he said in response to an audience question, the post-World War II boom is “over now and, therefore, we must have radical new departures in American society to get to full employment.” (Institute for Democratic Socialism 1979: 19) Harrington simultaneously invoked a key signifier of the emerging neoliberal-New Right hegemony and challenged its ideological presuppositions by claiming that the overriding economic strategy now must be “investment,” rather than mere stimulation of consumer demand. Harrington's potentially counter-hegemonic definition of *investment* is the conceptual base for his alternative

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<sup>30</sup> Founded in 1973, the Heritage Foundation is one of the most prominent and well-funded New Right research and advocacy organizations, and was at the forefront of the cultural and political struggles of the ascendant conservative hegemony. The group's stated mission is “to formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense.” (See <http://www.heritage.org/About>) Heritage is one of several conservative think tanks that received large sums from newly created right-wing foundations backed by wealthy families and corporate interests beginning in the late 1960s (Diamond 1995; Lapham 2004).

articulations of *productivity*, *the role of the state* and the practice of *democracy*, and, finally, *tax policy*. These alternative articulations suggest the kinds of messages that, I argue, could have been — but were not — circulated by media outlets during the first eight months of 1981, as the federal government set a policy course that began to fundamentally re-orient public priorities on both a material and a discursive level. Table 5-4 depicts the key significations produced in the potentially counter-hegemonic discourse represented by Harrington and in Kemp's hegemonic neoliberal-New Right discourse during the 1979 debate.

In Harrington's democratic-socialist discourse, "investment" is not identified primarily with private profit-making corporations. Instead, investment signifies collectively determined allocation of resources on the basis of their benefits to society. Rather than being controlled by the owners and managers of private businesses operating on the basis of private profit — and, thus, demanding to be "incentivized" by favorable government tax and spending policies — investment decisions would be arrived at through democratic deliberation at the national, regional, local, sector and firm levels, Harrington suggests: "We indeed have to have supply-side economics, but the real name of supply-side economics is democratic planning and democratic planning for social needs." (IDS 1979: 6)

This understanding differs fundamentally from the basic neoliberal-New Right conception, which identifies investment with private, self-interested initiative that is expected, through the aggregating mechanisms of the market, to result ultimately in the greatest possible overall good.<sup>31</sup> Small pockets of society that do not benefit sufficiently from

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<sup>31</sup> The remapping (or erasure) of class-power lines that is achieved through this construction of private, acquisitive behavior as normative is evident throughout the debate: the political imperative is "removing government barriers to production" so as to free "men and women of ambition and initiative," Kemp said. (IDS 1979: 13) The New York congressman resents his opponent's characterization of neoliberal-New Right ideology as an update of the basic value-premises and upper-class interests of traditional conservatism: indeed, his ideas transcend ideology and politics in a disinterested quest for "an answer" (IDS 1979: 7) that will pull America together: "We are one nation, one family, one people," Kemp said. "We must find solutions to our problems that bring everybody along. And I suspect it is far better than making the rich poorer, to make the poor wealthier."

this investment — as Kemp termed them, “unfortunate people who are not able to compete” (IDS 1979: 11), or Reagan’s “truly deserving needy” — would receive some mix of limited, restrictive and punitive public welfare programs and nongovernmental charity, informed by an ethic of private morality centered on generosity. In this understanding, one of the most effective ways to help the poor and particularly disadvantaged social constituencies is to spur private-sector job creation, thereby preventing people from having to, as Kemp put it, “depend on someone else’s production.” (IDS 1979: 16) Indeed, regulations that are justified in the embedded-liberal discourse as assisting those of low socioeconomic status actually harm them: “I think the minimum wage law is a tax against blacks, Hispanics and white teenagers getting jobs,” Kemp said. “The minimum wage law is a hundred percent tax against youths getting jobs in the private sector and I believe it discourages them.” (IDS 1979: 18)<sup>32</sup>

In contrast, investment for “social needs” in the democratic-socialist discourse implies *solidarity* — i.e. the identification of common interests and adherence to an ethic of mutual obligation. Decisions about human welfare should be made explicitly, consciously and collectively, Harrington suggests. “There is no incentive in the world that is going to get a private corporation to go into the South Bronx and build decent solar energy of an appropriate scale,” he said. (IDS 1979: 6) “Planning” signifies order, foresight, and the

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Highlighting the classless nature of his appeal, Kemp refers to his own “working family” and “small entrepreneur” background (IDS 1979: 26) to construct traditional American values such as the “right to...dispose of your earnings,” to “aspire to achieve.” (ibid: 9) Thus, everyone — from the corporate heads of IBM to Woolworth cashiers — who does “productive” work in the private economy as naturally motivated by possessive individualism will benefit from the neoliberal-New Right policy direction: “I don’t even talk about it in terms of class,” Kemp said. “I want to cut the tax rates for *everybody*, and I want *equal treatment for everybody*.” (ibid: 9, 26) This reification and de-historicization of market norms and their articulation with key cultural currents — Kemp said he hoped that his children “will be motivated to...not give up on America” (ibid: 26) — is even extended beyond national borders, and into the “less developed world.” (ibid: 18): “There are certain things upon which our economy, north and south...*must operate*, and it revolves around this word ‘incentive,’” he said (ibid: 9) Thus, the neoliberal-New Right recognition of the law of acquisitive human nature has positioned America for a renewed leadership role in the march toward global progress: “Another consensus is growing,” Kemp said. “The rest of the world is also looking to us for some type of economic and political model to replace the failed Keynesian model.” (ibid: 7)

<sup>32</sup> At the time, the official unemployment rate for African-American teenagers hovered around 45 percent (CQ Researcher 1982: 3). As I noted in the last chapter, the 1981 Reagan budget plan eliminated a key public jobs program and sharply reduced federal funding for employment training services.

identification of long-term social and economic goals. This contrasts with the neoliberal response of market allocation based on the competition of private preferences, and the resulting multiplication of social and ecological externalities. But *planning* also suggests a key divergence from Keynesian embedded liberalism's reliance on demand-management tools and business regulations. Demand-“management” signifies technocratic, top-down guidance of the private market through manipulation of interest rates, public spending and taxes; the regulatory state relies on the establishment of external boundaries to business activity in order to limit undesirable outcomes. In American common sense, “regulation” collides with a culturally powerful skepticism of state control, skepticism that seemed to be gaining popular currency in the 1970s (Harvey 2005: 39-63). On the other hand, “planning” implies care, practical wisdom, preparedness and prudence — significations that comport well with popular cultural understandings of appropriate behavior in everyday life. To be sure, democratic-socialist discourse and immediate policy programs support strong regulations on private business activity, but they contend that such restrictions — however crucial in the near term — ultimately merely curb destructive outcomes, and that the arrangement of state power as it is currently constituted undermines the effectiveness of these measures.

This leads to Harrington and Kemp's contending ideological conceptions of *the state* and of *democracy*. In neoliberal-New Right discourse, the state tends to be understood as a uniquely autonomous power center whose position and mode of operation fully outside of — and opposed to — market norms and imperatives suggests that its influence in most policy areas should be drastically curbed. Except for certain tasks necessary to the functioning of the private economy and the maintenance of socio-cultural order — chiefly judicial institutions, military programs and domestic law enforcement — the activity of what Kemp termed “the biggest *monolith* in the world” (IDS 1979: 7) must be scaled back or

eliminated. In the Keynesian-embedded liberal discourse of the mainstream Democratic Party at the time, the state “manages” private markets and “regulates” business activity, softening economic downturns, placing outer social limits on the acceptable consequences of private activity, and providing a measure of mass economic security.

On the other hand, in a democratic-socialist conception, while the broad outlines of business regulation and social welfare programs are supported — and the achievements of such measures of public control and provision are defended — the state in the contemporary historical context is understood to be mostly controlled by and responsive to concentrated private economic interests. Because of these conditions, mere regulation of markets is not a fundamental solution, however preferable it is to the so-called “unregulated” market of neoliberal-New Right rhetoric, because it builds in opportunities for corporations to undermine public control. As Harrington said, “this is the most basic thing I would suggest, I think that the government, not because of a conspiracy, but because of the relationship of economic and political power in our society, almost always follows corporate priorities.”<sup>33</sup> (IDS 1979: 11) Private firms enjoy generous federal subsidies and tax breaks, while affluent and wealthy people benefit disproportionately from tax expenditures. In addition, the state (increasingly in the neoliberal era) socializes market risk for large private enterprises and investors (Phillips 1990).<sup>34</sup> As Harrington put it, “after the Penn Central runs the railroad into the ground, you ask the government to take over a totally unprofitable and wrecked system, and you are amazed when it becomes a drag on the economy and doesn’t work very well.” (IDS 1979: 11)

<sup>33</sup> See also, in this connection, Lindblom’s (1977) classic argument regarding the “privileged position of business” in contemporary capitalist democracies, which points to how private corporations leverage their structural location as dominant sources of economic investment to limit and channel state activities for their benefit.

<sup>34</sup> See Page (1983) for an empirical analysis of the unequal economic benefits of U.S. state policies and institutional arrangements around the time of the neoliberal-New Right ascendancy.

Moreover — in contrast to the neoliberal-New Right signification of social welfare and business regulatory programs as nests of “inefficiency,” “waste,” “fraud” and “abuse” — a democratic-socialist perspective on the state opens up *military spending* to critical scrutiny on fiscal, economic and socio-moral grounds: “I would love to cut the budget. I would like to cut the Pentagon; I think there are billions in there,” Harrington said. “So I would like to take the *corporate rich* off *welfare*, take the *Pentagon* off *welfare*, and give the subsidies to *productive public enterprises* in a number of areas of great *social need*.”(13, 14) In neoliberal-New Right discourse, hefty military spending is necessary to protect and advance private markets, and to project American cultural and national superiority (in the debate with Harrington, Kemp does not respond to his opponent’s comments on the Pentagon budget). In some versions of Keynesian embedded liberalism, domestic spending is emphasized relatively more than military spending — and there have been intermittent attempts by elite segments of the Democratic Party from the 1980s onward to cut Pentagon programs — but the latter are nevertheless broadly justified both in terms of national defense and as an engine of economic stimulus.

But in the democratic-socialist idiom, it is military spending — and the subsidization of private corporate activity more generally — that is most strongly articulated with “inefficiency” (i.e. high cost in return for low social and economic benefits), “waste,” “fraud” and “abuse.” Economic and political connections between military agencies and major businesses — especially developers and manufacturers of high-tech strategic weapons systems, which were the main beneficiaries of the Reagan administration’s 1980s military spending spree (Ferguson and Rogers 1986: 124) — are emphasized and construed as forms of upwardly redistributive “corporate welfare.”

In sharp contrast, the 15-page Heritage Foundation report, straightforwardly titled “The Reagan Economic Program: Selected Budget Cuts,” does not reference military or related security programs at all, even though it appears to be the only publicly distributed policy document on the historic 1981 spending plan that the organization produced. Instead, its discourse is characterized by multiple signifiers connecting inefficiency and wastefulness to social welfare programs: such policies offer “excessive and unintended,” “misdirected” and “overly generous benefits;” clients try to “beat the system,” “abuse” and “misuse” public programs, and engage in “fraud;” agencies are characterized by “waste” and “mismanagement” that encourage “dependency.” (Ferrara 1981) Thus, beneficiaries of public programs — as well as, secondarily, their New Class administrators and advocates — are articulated with popular common sense images of slothful incompetency, scheming, deviancy and even criminality. Such people, in the conservative-populist idiom spoken by Reagan and his allies, are removed from the category of “producers,” their natural inclination toward economic self-reliance achieved through the private market — along with the social validation that is attached to being the source of goods and services that are purchased by other private market actors — having been subverted or perverted.<sup>35</sup> Significantly, in New Right discourse these public benefits clients are typically low- and moderate-income working people, rather than the wealthy and corporations. Thus, again, arms of the state that redistribute income and social status downward are delegitimized, while those that protect private markets, and, thus, redistribute resources upward are endorsed. Moreover, the strongest New Right currents advocate aggressive use of government power to discipline social welfare beneficiaries: the Heritage report calls for mandating strict medical exams for

<sup>35</sup> Illustrating the connections between corporate funding and the ideological legitimization of New Right policies, a report compiled and distributed to journalists and policymakers by W.R. Grace and Co. during the early 1980s argued for cutting social programs because “the combination of generous welfare benefits was making sloth more profitable than work.” (CQ Researcher 1982: 14, n. 12) A major agro-chemical and industrial conglomerate, W.R. Grace is better known today as the owner of the polluting mine featured in the book and film *A Civil Action*.



Social Security Disability Income eligibility (“to ensure the authenticity of disability”), government monitoring to “examine the characteristics of AFDC recipients more closely,” and creation of “a National Recipient Information System that would be used to collect information on individuals receiving assistance.” (Ferrara 1981)<sup>36</sup>

In Harrington’s formulation, “democratic” signifies inclusive, collective, participatory political decision-making processes, as well as a more egalitarian distribution of materials rewards. Of course, democracy holds deep, generally favorable, resonances in American common sense; Harrington articulates this key signifier with a vision of grassroots, popular social organization. As he asks, “is it possible for government to be much more democratic, is it possible for us to have co-ops and real participation of people. I think so.” (IDS 1979: 11) In the neoliberal-New Right vision, democracy is most often signified with markets themselves, especially the removal of state-imposed barriers to private economic initiative: during the debate, Kemp advocated a vision of what he called “democratic capitalism,” which is signified as a mechanism to promote private economic attainment, to “provide an opportunity for the independent, hard-working men and women of this country to get ahead.” (IDS 1979: 26) Significantly, the Heritage Foundation report articulates the democratic process itself with a market logic, whereby public preferences — unproblematically formed through individual cost-benefit analyses — constitute a “demand” for government actions. These actions, according to results from a public survey commissioned by Heritage itself, include larger domestic spending cuts than even the Reagan administration proposed in 1981; conversely, the public does *not* desire federally supported community service jobs programs, the report argues, because any “demand” for these would be “revealed through the political process” at the state or local level. “Otherwise, the tax

<sup>36</sup> Again, I explore in more depth the cultural legitimations, policy tools and ideological effects associated with these neoliberal-New Right currents in the analysis of the 1995-1996 welfare reform episode in Chapters 6 and 7.

dollars spent on these projects would be considered to outweigh the benefits.” (Ferraro 1981)

In democratic-socialist articulations, “democracy” not only signifies a much more directly participatory role for popular constituencies, it opens up *the economy itself* to some measure of public, collective control. Such an articulation is a potentially powerful counter-move to not only the neoliberal-New Right association of private capitalist market norms and practices with democracy, but also to conservative forces’ effective harnessing of popular resentment at perceived bureaucratization and state control — as Kemp put it, people are tired of “taxes, regulations, paper work, *frustration* and the bureaucracy” (IDS 1979: 14) — grounded in the failures of orthodox Keynesian liberalism to respond effectively to the material grievances and cultural suspicions of elitism during the 1970s. This re-imagining of *democracy* is an important dimension of the differentiation between such conventional liberal-statist conceptions and left-alternative understandings: rather than popular interests being protected in a largely top-down fashion — elected officials charging government technocrats with tasks of economic “management,” social welfare provision and business regulation — people would be engaged more fully in democratic control of the market for public benefit, especially at the everyday social sites of the neighborhood and workplace.

Harrington builds on this discursive-ideological move by recasting “productivity,” which is another key neoliberal-New Right trope. In a more straightforward economic sense, productivity is defined by “output” per hour of work “input” on an aggregate, typically nationwide, basis. But in conservative-populist constructions drawing on the producerist discourse, productivity connotatively signifies individuals working more, and, thus, presumably, earning more in private markets — e.g. putting in overtime, taking second and

third jobs, presumably leading to promotions and pay raises — as well as firms being incentivized to make “productive investments” that will lead to economic growth.<sup>37</sup> In democratic-socialist articulations, however, the signifier *productivity* is fundamentally reconstructed. Here, productivity is linked with the policy of a *reduction* in individuals’ work hours. Average time spent at work in the United States began a steady increase after World War II, which has accelerated with the emergence of the neoliberal order (Schor 1993); as an answer to high unemployment rates, Harrington suggests “a reduction of the work week, work sharing.” “Do we really need more work?” he asks. “One way to get more productivity is having people work less...people who have more leisure time are actually more productive.” (IDS 1979: 4) Thus, from this perspective people will work more diligently and intelligently — thus leading to higher aggregate productivity — if they enjoy the social, psychological and physical benefits of a healthier personal life. Moreover, the burden of work will be spread among more people, and environmental costs (which, as Harrington suggests, are typically not included in neoliberal calculations) would be reduced. Private incomes — and profits — would decrease to an extent, but stronger and more protective social programs would provide economic security, and relieve the costs of goods and services like health care and education.<sup>38</sup> As Harrington asks, “what good is it to have a tax cut so you can go spend your tax dollar on an inflated medical system that gives you less good care every year? How about spending some of the tax cuts on a decent health system?”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Harrington tells the audience, “I have to caution everybody about the use of the term ‘productive.’ It is one of the most slippery terms now in use...It’s one of the most dangerous and watery concepts around.” (IDS 1979: 22)

<sup>38</sup> Many European societies whose economic systems retain primary investment authority in privately owned corporations nevertheless employ policy approaches mandating shorter workweeks and more generous time off, based on the political judgment that an increase in leisure time is worth the cost of marginal decreases in material incomes (Baker 2007: 26-8; see especially Table 1-12 for comparisons of per-capita energy use among countries with different work policy arrangements).

<sup>39</sup> In contrast, New Right articulations signify public health spending with waste and inefficiency. For example, the Heritage Foundation report contends that programs such as Medicaid “artificially inflate the demand for health care.” (Ferrara 1981) Note that social service provision is constructed as *artificial* because decisions to seek care are not disciplined by (taken-for-

Deep cuts in marginal tax rates and reductions in domestic public spending will not incentivize “productive” private work, Harrington argues, because unlike in the era of laissez-faire competitive markets mythologized by the neoliberal-New Right, the majority of people do not autonomously determine how many hours they work: “We are in an economy where most people are *forced* to work on the basis offered to them by the corporation,” he said. “That is the reality.” (IDS 1979: 4) Here Harrington again opens up the question of public control of the economy, signifying *democracy* not only as socially determined investment in general, but more specifically as popular influence on everyday work practices and arrangements. Moreover, notions of illegitimate power relations — which, through the culturally resonant signs of freedom, liberty and democracy, carry deep negative associations in popular common sense — are connected in the democratic-socialist discourse with the hierarchical and authoritarian internal structures and processes of market firms. Power operates not only directly through the state — e.g., in neoliberal-New Right discourse, the government forces “producers” to hand over their income for the purported benefit of “unproductive” members of society — but also in the private economy as companies “force” people to adhere to the work paces and practices determined by management for the benefit of owners.<sup>40</sup>

Unlike in Reagan’s invocation of “industry” during his February speech above, Harrington specifically employs the signifier “corporation:” this draws associations with the

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granted) market norms that leverage individual utility calculations: presumably, the propensity to seek medical help would be reset at “natural” levels if everyone had to consider its personal economic costs. People would “consume” less health care, and prices would fall. Of course, this logic ignores evidence of other sources of medical inflation — such as marketing, advertising, high management salaries and administrative overhead. Indeed, the United States, with its largely private, for-profit system, spends much more per capita on health care than any other industrialized nation (Jacobs and Skocpol 2010: 21).

<sup>40</sup> This formulation represents a radical break with neoliberal-New Right discourse in particular, but also with the separation of “politics” and “economy” that has long undergirded capitalist social relations broadly: here, politics — and power, including raw forms of material compulsion and physical coercion — always-already suffuses the economy. For Harrington and others speaking this discourse, the question is not whether power will be “imposed” on the “private” economy, but rather, what kinds of influences and decision-making practices, enacted by what social forces, and with what interests in mind, will predominate (see Gramsci 2005 [1971]: 160).

fabric of bureaucratic (rather than personal, individualized) control in contemporary private businesses, where a group of owner-investors charges a management cadre with creating a disciplined, profit-maximizing machine. Indeed, Harrington specifically contends that “investment in the American economy...has now become a highly social, collectivized and bureaucratized process.” (IDS 1979: 4) “Bureaucracy”— a favored neoliberal-New Right signifier deployed against state social welfare and business regulatory programs that has deep cultural resonances in popular common sense — is articulated here with private companies. Thus, democratic-socialist visions counter suspicions of top-down control not only in the realm of the state, but in the economy as well, suspicions that continue to be significant cultural liabilities for Keynesian-embedded liberal discourse and political-policy arrangements.

Harrington’s left-alternative articulations also operate to counter the neoliberal-New Right construction of pro-market ideas as signifying novelty, progress, creativity and dynamism, as contrasted with the tired, grey formulas of New Deal-Great Society liberalism. Harrington suggests that supply-side tax dogma and contemporary attacks on the welfare and business regulatory state represent a nostalgic attempt to return to an “imagined glorious past” of freedom and decentralized competition; neoliberal-New Right formulations misapprehend the centralized, hierarchical, bureaucratic texture of the contemporary political economy: “Trickle down is based on an Adam Smithian type of economy at a time when it no longer exists,” Harrington said. “I’m delighted that Congressman Kemp is dragging the Republican Party into the 1760s, but I point out to you that this is the 1980s.” (IDS: 1979: 3, 6)

In what turned out to be the last statement in the debate, Kemp sounds populist tones in proclaiming that, “I think *the people want* to invest and save, and have a *dynamic view of*

*their future that transcends* the vision of society advocated by my distinguished friend and colleague, Mr. Harrington.” (IDS 1979: 27) Thus, market values and possessive individualism — and neoliberal-New Right policy approaches — are articulated with positive change, even mystical transcendence. Embedded liberal discourse lacked an effective answer to such constructions of its policy approaches as tools of an exhausted and old-fashioned philosophy.

Harrington addresses this failure of vision by not only defending social welfare and business regulation as historic popular achievements, but by moving beyond them to offer ideas for political-economic democracy and social investment — and by presenting these as new, imaginative and exciting. “So what I’m saying is, there is the possibility of a grass roots democracy making economic decisions,” Harrington said. “It’s not a sure thing but it’s one of the things that I think can be done.” (IDS 1979: 11) In this vision, private market transactions — with their basis in an ahistorical conception of human beings as self-interested utility-maximizing agents: “people respond to rewards,” Kemp flatly asserts (ibid: 22); “many things have changed, but people have not lost the desire to improve their lot” (ibid: 8) — are not reified as the standard for all social relations. We are not robots constructed on the basis of a crude, mechanistic stimulus-response model driven solely by personal economic gain.<sup>41</sup>

The potentially counter-hegemonic discursive foundations that Harrington lays are finally articulated with specific government actions that fundamentally challenge the neoliberal-New Right advocacy of supply-side tax cuts aimed at spurring private market work, savings and investment, justified in populist terms through the classless producerist

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<sup>41</sup> In this connection, Harrington contends that empirical economic policy research shows that in the face of an income tax cut, people (if given the opportunity) are as likely to work *less* — gaining more leisure time — than they are to work more, as neoliberal-New Right supply-side conceptions contend (IDS 1979: 4).

narrative. Harrington calls this “a program in which private greed masquerades as the public interest” that will “maldistribute wealth.” (IDS 1979: 3) His formulation signifies that wealth is socially — rather than individually — produced, and thus ought to be *socially distributed*, through both the revenue and expenditure dimensions of government policy. Far from being punitive on the materially successful and “productive” (i.e. those who, naturally, aspire to be materially successful), American income and wealth taxes even before the Reagan reconfiguration were actually not even “progressive,” Harrington contends: “It’s terrible,” he said of the national tax system. “It is, as Jimmy Carter rightly said, a disgrace to the human race. But the problem with it is not...that it’s confiscatory.” (IDS 1979: 5)

Of course, in neoliberal-New Right discourse “confiscatory” signifies the illegitimate power of the state to raid the fruits of private labor. In popular common sense, to confiscate implies the (tacitly unjust) application of police force. But Harrington argues that nominal marginal rates on those in high-income brackets are deceptive, given the many tax expenditures that both by their rationale and their complexity favor the well-off: “The only rich people in the United States who pay a 70 percent tax are rich people so dumb they don’t know how to call a lawyer or an accountant,” he said (IDS 1979: 17).<sup>42</sup> Moreover, in contrast to the New Right construction of estate taxes as oppressions against humble producers like farmers and small business owners, Harrington casts such taxes — which he proposes to increase — as democratic mechanisms to encourage equality of opportunity and distribute social and economic burdens more fairly: doing so “would make those extra-rich young people work,” he said. (ibid: 25) In the end, Harrington calls for a large tax cut for lower- and middle-income working people. But because the labor of the majority and

<sup>42</sup> As I note in the last chapter, one of the effects of the 1981 plan was to further encourage tax sheltering by affluent and wealthy individuals (Steuerle 1992: 48-52). Moreover, despite intermittent efforts to roll back loopholes, the complexity and unfairness of what scholars call the “hidden welfare state” (Howard 1997; Mettler and Guardino 2010) have become more egregious as neoliberalization has proceeded apace and as the New Right has consolidated its hegemony in the U.S. state apparatus and political discourse.

favorable government policies have played crucial roles in helping the wealthy attain their material advantages, they should bear much more of the costs for the social infrastructure that has made their status possible: “I will match dollar for dollar my passion for giving more income to working people in the United States with anybody in this room,” he said. “Our dispute is not about whether we should cut the taxes of working people, which I am for, but whether the rich will finally pay their fair share.” (IDS 1979: 21)

This potentially counter-hegemonic articulation suggests that a social reformulation of *investment, productivity, the state and democracy* in the realms of tax and spending policy can resonate as much with American popular aspirations and capacities (“human nature”) as does the neoliberal-New Right formulation based on “incentivizing” desires for more material income as achieved through the market. Harrington’s discourse suggests that new socio-political arrangements — based on new cultural visions — are imaginable and practically achievable through political action and popular struggle. Thus, *democracy* itself is yet again re-signified in the very fabric of counter-hegemonic struggle: Harrington’s language suggests that new arrangements would be substantively democratic in the ways I explore above, but also, that the process of achieving these new arrangements — for example, through new modes of organization and communication — would (indeed must) be democratic. Finally, the philosophical conception of humanity implicit in these articulations is thoroughly democratic in that it views people as agents capable of collectively re-imagining through critical analysis — and rearranging through practical struggle — their social relations.

These visions and projects, however, are not new in the strong sense of “unprecedented:” rather, they are re-imaginings, re-appropriations and re-articulations of past and contemporary material arrangements and cultural understandings, and could draw



sustenance from communitarian and egalitarian currents of American common sense that have been de-emphasized in recent decades. I turn now to two of many potential cultural sources of counter-hegemonic articulations in opposition to concentrated political-economic power that might have been — and still might be — recovered to forge responses to the material grievances and social frustrations caused by neoliberal tax and social welfare policy.

Even at the founding of the American state, there was significant opposition to the growing dominance of market values and institutional arrangements. The most prominent voice in this debate was Thomas Jefferson, whose writings and practices — despite the effective appropriation of his legacy by conservatism, and by the New Right in particular — consistently reject the ethos of market liberalism and limited democracy that has often been considered America's consensus ideology (Matthews 1984). Jefferson advocated a vision of humanism, communitarian anarchism and radical democratic participatory politics that combined opposition to market exploitation and what critical theorists today might call the capitalist state with an expansive view of human potential grounded in a robust faith in substantive democracy.<sup>43</sup> He consistently railed against wage labor and the institutionalization of private property rights in “natural law”-based permanent constitutions: “To Jefferson, economics and politics are always contingent upon each other. To talk of them as separate makes no sense. Hence, freedom in the one area necessitates freedom in the other.” (Matthews 1984: 35) Here, “economic freedom” meant not freedom from the

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<sup>43</sup> Moreover, in a formulation that is not unlike Gramsci's philosophy of praxis, Jefferson subscribed to a view of history in which people hold the capacity to continually remake themselves, and to collectively direct and control this process through social struggle and political action: “Men must be allowed to make their own history consciously. But this history and the manner of creating it are themselves subject to human alteration. It is the right to create, rather than the creation itself, that must be valued above all.” (Matthews 1984: 126)

In contrast to many of his contemporaries, who held famously pessimistic views of human nature as animated by selfish, violent passions centered mainly on the acquisition and use of private property, Jefferson professed something closer to a historicist understanding that held open the possibility of continual democratization as the horizons of human potential unfolded: “Rather than maintain that there is but one model of man, based on some fixed, immutable laws of human behavior, Jefferson believes that man's nature changes under the impact of time, as well as of circumstances... His study of the American Indians, which resulted in a deep admiration of these tribal communities, helped to convince Jefferson that man was a social, harmonious, cooperative, and just creature who, under the appropriate socioeconomic conditions, could happily live in a community that did not need the presence of the Leviathan.” (Matthews 1984: 34, 17-18)

social encroachments of confiscatory taxation and redistribution that would deny the acquisitive rights of atomized market actors, but the positive right of all citizens to a guaranteed measure of economic security that would foster the conditions for political freedom and the full development of their public and private capacities: “Man was meant to be much more than a mere consumer or an appropriator.” (ibid: 26) These ideas were founded on a clear rejection of the notion of property as either an end in itself or as a fundamental right beyond the reach of democratic revision: “The earth is given as a common stock for man to labor and live on,” Jefferson wrote (Koch and Peden 1998: 162); thus, rules and customs for arranging property relations are the product of political decisions.<sup>44</sup> He even went so far as to advocate the right and obligation of each generation to critically review and rewrite its laws (in particular as they pertain to the “social grant” [ibid: 50] of property holding) to keep pace with changes in social conditions and the evolution of human intellect and moral imagination.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in addition to various schemes for progressive taxation and the breaking up of large family landholdings, Jefferson several times proposed that every adult male citizen be given 50 acres as a matter of public right. Early 19<sup>th</sup>-century American socialists would build on his ideas as the market system entrenched itself (ibid: 29).<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> When Jefferson, who was then U.S. minister to France, was asked by Lafayette to review the *Declaration of the Rights of Man*, he advised that the “right to property” should be dropped in favor of “the pursuit of happiness,” echoing the wording he chose for the Declaration of Independence (Matthews 1984: 28).

<sup>45</sup> As Matthews (1984: 84) put it, “each generation must be allowed to begin anew. Each must redefine its goals and ideals; all must recommit themselves to each other.” Rather than subscribing to the notion of “tacit consent” that was dominant among most of his contemporaries, Jefferson believed that democratic consent must be the outcome of conscious processes of social deliberation in which the whole of collective relations is fodder for the political agenda: “By requiring periodic, critical reevaluations of every facet of society, Jefferson believes he can maintain the vitality of a democratic community based on right, not force.” (ibid: 23)

<sup>46</sup> As he wrote the Rev. James Madison, the cousin of his good friend and constitutional architect, “enormous inequality produc(es) so much misery to the bulk of mankind.” (Koch and Peden 1998: 161). And the development of capitalist wage labor held deep dangers for popular political sovereignty, leading to “wretchedness and oppression,” Jefferson argued: “the bulk of the society is reduced to be mere automatons of misery, to have no sensibilities left but for sinning and suffering: Our people... must come to labor sixteen hours in the twenty-four... have no time to think, no means of calling the mismanagers to account; but be glad to obtain subsistence by hiring ourselves to rivet their chains on the necks of our fellow sufferers (ibid: 615).

But one need not reach so far back in history to identify rhetorical threads and policy programs connecting culturally resonant fragments of popular common sense with calls for potentially counter-hegemonic political-economic change that might respond effectively to concrete mass grievances: discourses and practices of economic democracy and popular decision-making in the workplace have a long — and largely submerged — history in America. The period spanning roughly from the late 1870s until just after World War II was an epoch of ongoing waves of intense labor militancy and myriad attempts to forge a class political consciousness in the United States that might rival that which informed the left-labor and social democratic parties of Europe (Davis 2007 [1986]: Chs. 1-3). Amidst deep factional divisions over race and ethnicity, religion and culture, movement tactics and political strategy, and broad social vision, one consistent feature of the lower-status politics of this period was a call for democratic control of the workplace. Various unions and political alignments disagreed — sometimes vehemently — over the proper means by which to achieve this control, what the substance of differently arranged work structures and practices might look like, and how far-reaching their demands should be. But the idea that management prerogatives regarding the pace and organization of work should be challenged, and that employees were entitled to positive rights to govern collectively in some measure what was and is arguably the most crucial dimension of their daily lives, constituted a consistent theme in the labor movement of the time. In presenting these visions, activists, left-intellectuals and political candidates appealed both to workers' immediate material interests and to traditional American cultural currents of self-government.<sup>47</sup>

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See Nedelsky (1990) for a conceptual and historical account of submerged strains of politico-economic egalitarianism in early U.S. constitutional and political discourse, and an analysis of the ideological and practical tensions that accompanied the institutionalization of market-liberal legal theory into the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>47</sup> Calls for extending democratic norms and practices to the workplace resurfaced from a different source in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the New Left-inspired participatory democracy movement, which also appealed both to the material interests of workers and to Jeffersonian-tinged arguments about the promise of widespread popular decision-making to

Demands for forms of economic democracy in the broader labor movement waned after World War II, as the Cold War-era “wage-productivity” bargain was struck, symbolized by the 1950 “Treaty of Detroit,” in which unions agreed to sanctify employer political prerogatives in the workplace — regarding, for instance, the use of new technologies, the timing and speed of work, and the settlement of worker grievances — and to limit demands almost exclusively to pay and benefit issues tied to productivity levels, in return for what was thought at the time to be permanent institutionalization of union representation in the industrial sectors (Moody 1988: Ch. 3).<sup>48</sup> But until this entrenchment of a bureaucratically managed “business unionism,” calls to “democratize” the economy along the two key dimensions identified in 1979 by Michael Harrington — the institutionalization of collectively determined investment decision-making based on “social need” and buttressed by participatory governance structures, and collective worker autonomy over everyday arrangements and practices at the job site — were a prominent feature of labor politics.<sup>49</sup>

My aim in briefly discussing some potentially counter-hegemonic cultural traces in American political-economic history is certainly not to endorse — or even to argue the merits of — any particular social vision or political program, let alone to gloss over the

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energize human capacities (see the *Port Huron Statement*, issued by Students for a Democratic Society, available at: <http://coursesa.matrix.msu.edu/~hst306/documents/huron.html>).

SDS founder Tom Hayden launched the “Campaign for Economic Democracy” (CDE) in California in 1977; the organization was an effective force in regional electoral and policy campaigns through the early 1980s. CDE elected more than 50 candidates to city and county offices (including in Los Angeles and Oakland) and propelled Hayden himself into the state Assembly in 1982. As the New Right gained force and the leadership of the Democratic Party began to drift toward a conservative accommodation with neoliberalism, the group sought to make inroads into Democratic politics with a vision of increasing public control and ownership of economic enterprises by governments, unions, cooperatives, community groups and consumer organizations (Wiener 1986).

<sup>48</sup> Along with this “truce” came a normalization of union political energy within the Democratic Party under the embedded-liberal ideological framework. The decades before World War II were a period of intense radical third-party activity that until the early 1920s featured a vibrant Socialist Party that ran presidential candidates in every election of the period (Eugene V. Debs garnered nearly a million votes in 1912 — about 6 percent of the total — in an electoral system structured to ensure victory by one of the two major parties) (Davis 2007 [1986]: Ch. 2).

<sup>49</sup> Even segments of the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century progressive movement — remembered today chiefly for its campaign against the corruptions of party patronage, for the normalization of municipal public services, and for tools of direct ballot democracy such as the initiative and referendum — advocated strongly for forms of workplace democracy. Herbert Croly (who co-founded *The New Republic* magazine), devoted much of his 1915 book *Progressive Democracy* to this issue, and Wisconsin Progressive Sen. Robert M. La Follette Sr. in 1924 garnered nearly 17 percent of the popular vote running for president as an independent with backing from the Socialist Party (although he had refused the party’s direct nomination after a red-baiting campaign led by the conservative-individualist AFL [Davis 2007 (1986): 50-51]).

contradictions, tensions and misapprehensions in the work of Jefferson, pre-World War II labor activists, or any other political thinker or social movement. Indeed, from a broadly neo-Gramscian perspective, tension and contradiction in discourse and practice are unavoidable: it is from the ideological ruptures of past and contemporary political and social life that humans enact new visions, institutions and practices. Rather, I mean simply to show that ideas which voices like Michael Harrington circulated at the crucial historical moment when the neoliberal-New Right was poised to make its fateful ascent to the pinnacle of U.S. institutional politics were not misty-eyed fantasies unconnected either to the material conditions and policy debates of the late 1970s and early 1980s, or to the plausible cultural resources and socio-political aspirations of ordinary Americans. Thus, not only were potentially counter-hegemonic social visions and policy perspectives available in public discourse when news outlets had an opportunity to foster a more thoroughly democratic discussion of the Reagan economic agenda, but these messages had deep ideological roots in American political culture and practice.

## **VII. Conclusion: Reaganism Wins the Battle, but Not the War of Position?**

As I demonstrated through my content analyses in the last chapter, negative ideological mechanisms operated not only to mute and scatter in mass media coverage embedded liberal responses to the neoliberal-New Right campaign for the Reagan economic plan, but also to virtually shut out altogether potentially counter-hegemonic perspectives. Moreover, as I elaborate above, coverage was dominated by an elite-focused dramatic spectacle that marginalized policy substance in favor of procedural, strategic and tactical discourse embedded in a performative code that symbolically depoliticized and demobilized popular constituencies. And the messages critical of the Reagan program that mainstream media did infrequently circulate were grounded in a perspective that shared certain key

material, cultural and social assumptions with those circulated by conservatives, and thus were vulnerable to right-wing populist criticisms that resonated powerfully with currents of common sense. The problems for center-left Democratic Party discourse involved the New Right's effective articulation of state control with the stifling of private economic initiative as naturally desired by "productive" constituencies at all income and wealth levels, the signification of embedded liberalism as drab and old — as compared with the resurgent conservative vision of the future as a dynamic return to traditional American fundamentals — and, ultimately, the inability or unwillingness of institutional opponents of the Reagan agenda to reconfigure their vision from one based primarily on top-down socioeconomic management, to one based more on popular democratic control over both the economy and the state.

This opening allowed for the stitching together of a hegemonic coalition in support of the New Right-Reagan agenda to replace the articulations of poor people and low-/middle-income workers, on the one hand, as against high-income citizens, the wealthy and large property owners, on the other, which politically buttressed the center-left core of the Democratic Party from the 1930s through the 1960s. This new coalition was both a discursive construction and a practical achievement: the circulation of rhetoric and images that forged connections between material conditions, social identities and fragments of popular common sense was central to creating conditions under which a significant (though far from overwhelming) proportion of low- and middle-income people might *act* in support of New Right goals — by voting for Reagan and his congressional allies, expressing policy support in public opinion polls on the basis of the consistent activation (or priming) of these articulations, writing letters, making phone calls or sending telegrams in support of the "Great Communicator's" agenda, and so on. Circulating campaign rhetoric that was similar

to the discourse I analyze here, during the 1980 election the Reagan-Bush ticket temporarily bucked long-running trends from the post-New Deal era by attracting larger-than-usual vote shares from lower- and middle-income citizens, self-identified “blue collar” workers and members of union households.<sup>50</sup> And as I discussed in the last chapter, polls during the 1981 economic policy debate showed strong support for the core elements of the Reagan agenda. Thus, a significant measure of popular consent to the conservative turn at its inception into institutional American politics would be achieved, a consent which, while uneven and fragile, was durable and effective enough to legitimate major shifts in public policy and power arrangements highly favorable to the emerging neoliberal political-economic order.

But my analyses suggest that this was not an inevitable outcome. As I argued in Chapter 2, political organization and intellectual struggle were central to the New Right’s initial ascendance, as well as to its effectiveness in achieving key economic and social welfare policy goals; victory in Gramsci’s “war of position” is never final, so counter-hegemonic interventions could have made a difference — and may yet in the future. In the next two chapters, I advance the narrative 14 years to a time when Democrats once again held the White House, exploring news coverage and political discourse during the consolidating phase of the neoliberal-New Right hegemony. Did the Democratic Party and left-of-center nongovernmental organizations mount an effective rhetorical challenge to the conservative offensive against AFDC that constituted one of the key unfinished agenda items of Reaganism? And how did mass media refract political discourse during this crucial episode? I

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<sup>50</sup> According to exit polls, Reagan won 41 percent of voters with annual family incomes of less than \$10,000 (about \$26,111 in 2010 dollars), compared to 50 percent for Carter; 42 percent of those making \$10,000 to \$14,999 (about \$39,163), compared to 47 percent for Carter; and 53 percent of those with incomes of \$15,000 to \$24,999 (equivalent to around \$65,275), compared to 38 percent for Carter. The GOP ticket captured the votes of 47 percent of “blue-collar” workers, compared to 46 percent for Carter; as well as 44 percent of voters from union households, compared to 47 percent for the Democrats. In contrast, in 1976 Carter beat Republican Gerald Ford among the two lowest income groups, in the self-identified blue-collar constituency, and in union households by margins of 12-20 percentage points. Reagan also won significantly higher percentages of voters with a high-school education or less than had been the case for the GOP in previous contests. These data were reported in *The New York Times* on Nov. 9, 1980, available through the LexisNexis online archive (see also the evidence in Hibbs 1982).

begin to answer these questions in Chapter 6, with quantitative analysis of news coverage during the welfare reform debate of 1995-1996.



## Chapter 6 -- “No One Wants to Change the System as Much as Those Who Are Trapped by It:” Mass Media Hegemony and the Welfare Retreat

### I. Introduction

*USA Today* readers who opened their January 5, 1995, papers to page 6A may have been drawn to a story on welfare reform with the intriguing headline “A Family’s Tales: Progress, Pitfalls.” The text begins by introducing Shannon Lloyd, a single mother in Wisconsin who celebrated her 18<sup>th</sup> birthday by applying for Aid to Families With Dependent Children benefits and moving out of her parents’ home. Lloyd then expresses support for government social programs — as it turns out, one of very few such statements that appeared in the paper’s coverage of this landmark policy debate: “A lot of people put you down for using taxpayers’ money,” she said. “But that’s what taxes are for.”

In light of the headline and the arresting lead-in, those who were curious about what welfare recipients thought of efforts to reduce benefits, institute stringent work requirements and impose strict time limits for federal assistance might have assumed that the story would primarily present the issue from the perspective of benefits clients. If so, they would have been wrong. Most of this 1,211-word report — long by American newspaper standards, and exceptionally long for *USA Today* — presented discourse from national Republican and Democratic Party elites, who expressed a general consensus in favor of these program changes in a bid to combat the social pathologies bred by welfare dependency. The report ends with some perspective from Shannon Lloyd’s parents, who were said to be “enjoying the fruits of (state-run) mandatory job training.” According to the story, they warned Shannon that “welfare was a trap, but she wanted independence.”

This report manifests several key themes in mainstream U.S. news coverage of welfare reform during 1995 and 1996: on the few occasions when AFDC recipients (current

and former) were afforded a media platform, they were almost always examples of “success stories” who managed to leave the rolls prodded by state experiments with benefits austerity and “workfare” that activated their sense of personal initiative and self-respect. The primary ideological subtext for these stories, and for the bulk of *USA Today* and television news coverage of the issue, was the prominent neoliberal-New Right argument that government social provision saps the moral fiber, work ethic, self-esteem — even the spirit — of low-income citizens. Recipients themselves were often cast as testifying that they needed to be forced to develop into responsible workers and members of society. In general, however, the mainstream media discussion of welfare reform was carried by the voices of prominent political elites who — despite some differences of degree and emphasis — communicated a bipartisan consensus in favor of making AFDC less generous and more punitive that was grounded in this stigmatizing narrative of dependency: more than eight of every 10 sources in major TV news and *USA Today* stories were government officials, compared to 4 percent who were ordinary citizens (welfare recipients and others). And statements claiming or suggesting that the welfare system discourages individual economic and social initiative made up the largest category of substantive frames in coverage of the issue.

In this chapter, I present evidence from a rigorous quantitative content analysis of mainstream print and television news coverage of welfare reform from January 1, 1995 (just before the GOP “Contract With America” Congress took office), through August 22, 1996 (when President Clinton signed the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act, known as PRWORA). My major findings, based on examination of every evening TV news and *USA Today* report on the issue during that period, are twofold:

1) Coverage was anchored by a largely non-substantive discourse concerned mainly with institutional procedure and the internal political machinations of Washington elites. Official government sources and procedural, strategic and tactical frames significantly outnumbered other voices and interpretations throughout the 20 months of coverage, and a plurality of news stories focused on these dimensions. Thus, media coverage sidelined the substantive design and socioeconomic implications of welfare policy proposals in favor of an elite-centered spectacle that presented political debate as a petty game with little connection to news audiences.

2) When mainstream media did cover substantive aspects of welfare reform, right-of-center actors and ideas overwhelmed alternative voices and perspectives. In particular, Republican elites — despite their not controlling the executive branch — held a substantial numerical edge over all other sources. Even Clinton administration voices (who comprised the second-largest category) most often presented interpretations favorable to limitations on welfare benefits and spending, and the coercion of recipients into low-wage labor markets. By far the largest category of policy frames focused on the social and personal ills of welfare dependency; left-of-center nongovernmental groups played almost no role in the debate as presented in mainstream news; and ordinary citizens — including recipients — were relegated nearly to invisibility.<sup>1</sup>

In broad terms, my evidence in this chapter from the period when the neoliberal social welfare and economic policy regime was being consolidated mirrors the patterns of

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<sup>1</sup> As Sparks (2003: 171-2) wrote, “marginalized at congressional hearings and mostly ignored or discounted by the press, welfare recipients ended up primarily on the sidelines of this critical dialogue...The result of this distortion is that some citizens’ voices are consistently amplified in the context of democratic discussions, while others are muffled or silenced altogether.”

news coverage presented in Chapter 4 on the 1981 Reagan tax and budget plan: like in the previous case, hegemony operated here in the negative ideological register to limit mass media discourse largely to a spectacle of elite maneuvering that sidelined policy content. And as in 1981, news outlets refracted the welfare reform debate into a discussion dominated by the conservative themes and voices of the neoliberal New Right — joined, in this case, by the so-called “New Democrats.” The most significant difference in overall mass communication patterns between the two episodes appears to be the stronger bipartisan support for conservative reconfigurations of the welfare state in the latter case. This points to the increasing accommodation of Democratic Party leaders to the political discourse and policy agendas of the neoliberal-New Right hegemony — and to the adaptation of mainstream media institutions themselves to what was understood as a shifting consensus among legitimate elites. This is seen most clearly in the New Democrat advocacy of “personal responsibility” and its valorization of private markets as against government social provision, which formed the dominant narrative of Clinton administration mass media messages on welfare. As such, the overall tenor of mainstream news coverage during this policy episode was even more tilted toward the right than during debate on the 1981 economic plan.

My media content evidence in this chapter also points to a particular instance of the amplified discursive separation of state and market that has accompanied neoliberalization — and the resulting ideological mystification of power relations that cut across both government and economy: over 20 months of coverage, network TV and mass market print news scarcely suggested that there are linkages between public social provision and the larger economy, especially the low-wage labor market. I elaborate this theme in the critical discourse analyses that are the subject of the next chapter. Before beginning to present my

evidence on media coverage, however, I set the stage by sketching the concrete shape of the 1995-1996 welfare debate, and the policy changes endorsed and advanced by a Democratic president that constituted one of the crucial unfinished projects of Reaganism.

## **II. Policy Background: Fraying the Social Safety Net Under Neoliberalism**

Major changes to the federal system of cash grants and associated benefits for poor Americans had been on the political agenda in some form for several decades before the enactment of PRWORA. During the approximately 40 years that comprised the period of New Deal-Great Society embedded liberalism, much of the impetus for retrenchments in welfare came from state and local officials in more conservative municipalities and regions. While (as I demonstrate below and in the following chapter) the role of race in media coverage and political discourse during the 1995-1996 episode was subtle and complex, the racialized and gendered character of early efforts against welfare is unmistakable: the beginnings of the political push to restrict benefits coincided with larger numbers of African-American women going on AFDC in the 1950s (Jost 1992), and accelerated as poverty came to be seen by many whites — and reflected in mainstream news coverage (Gilens 1999) — as largely a black urban issue. Riots and uprisings in many cities during the mid- to late-1960s amidst frustration with continuing social and economic degradation despite the gains in formal political equality achieved by the Civil Rights movement prompted the emerging New Right and its sympathizers to target welfare. These forces depicted means-tested programs as poisonous enablers of sloth and irresponsibility that fed cultural deviancy and criminality among the poor, as seen in sexual promiscuity, out-of-wedlock births, alcoholism and illegal drug use, and other pathologies (Jost 1992; see also Quadagno 1994).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan — then a bureaucrat in the Johnson administration's Department of Labor and later a domestic policy advisor in the Nixon White House before moving on to become a long-serving Democratic senator from New York — released a report that tied urban social unrest, economic backwardness and welfare dependency to cultural deficiencies centered on the breakdown of the black family. Moynihan urged policies to reinstate African-American men as

Various reforms of the welfare system centering on mandatory work programs and behavioral surveillance were proposed, with some enacted at the local and state levels, and others implemented piecemeal at the federal level beginning in the 1960s. These included provisions such as restricting or denying benefits for additional children, for unwed teen mothers and for families whose children skipped school, and even (as in Maryland) penalizing welfare recipients who didn't pay rent on time (Kellam 1994: 4).<sup>3</sup> Reformers claimed that social benefits trapped the poor in a cycle of indignity that denied them the ability to cultivate habits of thrift and economic initiative, and to accumulate wealth by participating in private markets. As then-California Governor Reagan said in his 1967 inaugural address, "we are not going to perpetuate poverty by substituting a permanent dole for a paycheck." California set a national example by passing a major series of welfare restrictions and work requirements in 1971 (Jost 1992: 3). At the federal level, President Nixon's proposal to replace AFDC with a guaranteed national income combined with work incentives foundered not long after this, as right-wing critics (including the Chamber of Commerce) panned the so-called Family Assistance Plan (FAP) for institutionalizing government social support without adequate work mandates, Southern business interests feared it would undermine the low-wage labor market, and many liberal Democrats and their

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breadwinners who could use their validation as market actors to retake their traditionally dominant role in the household, thus slowing the rise in female-headed families (Quadagno 1994: 124). As I demonstrate below and discuss in Chapter 7, by the mid-1990s mass media was presenting Moynihan as the leading "left-of-center" critic of welfare reform.

Nearly 20 years later, conservative scholar Charles Murray provided the neoliberal-New Right with its key intellectual rallying cry on welfare in the book *Losing Ground: American Social Policy 1950-1980*. Murray took a more individualist approach to the issue that nevertheless shared many key assumptions with Moynihan's thesis, arguing for immediately cutting off government social supports because of their alleged enabling of out-of-wedlock births, which he claimed as the root of myriad economic and social pathologies (Quadagno 1994: 176-78).

<sup>3</sup> The landscape of reform measures during the 1960s and 1970s was complex and multidimensional. Some policies liberalized benefits: a 1962 federal law for the first time allowed states to make households with unemployed fathers eligible for AFDC, although few states chose to do so (Jost 1992; Quadagno 1994: 120); the mid- to late-1960s witnessed a significant broadening of eligibility and reduction of administrative obstacles to welfare application in the wake of protests by newly radicalized poor mothers, which was accomplished in part at the state and local levels, and through federal court decisions that began to affirm a "right to welfare" (Piven and Cloward 1977, 1993 [1971]; Quadagno 1994: 120). However, especially after the failure of FAP in 1972, reform efforts generally took the shape favored by the New Right, reflecting the growing elite consensus of "neoliberal paternalism" that sought to impose market discipline on the poor, which I discuss in the next chapter.

constituencies opposed the measure as not going far enough to guarantee a safety net (Quadagno 1994: 117-34). Loosening of federal standards governing programs for low-income people spurred state- and local-level conservative reforms during the 1970s, but an unwillingness to substantially compromise the national guarantee of assistance to poor mothers that was enshrined in the New Deal prevailed during the decade, when Democrats held large majorities in the House of Representatives.

However, Reagan's 1981 budget plan marked a watershed in the conservative assault on AFDC. This measure significantly cut welfare benefits and for the first time enacted broad federal permission for states to begin to implement work requirements on a large scale (the president had pushed that states be mandated to do so, but congressional Democrats turned back this proposal). The law set off a flurry of efforts to "experiment" with work programs and other measures aimed at attacking the disease of welfare dependency (Fording 2003; Haskins 2006: 33-36). During the last year of the Reagan administration in 1988, Congress passed the Family Support Act (FSA), which contained a mixture of provisions that appealed to mainstream elite policy voices on both sides of the partisan divide, but was focused mostly on incentives and so-called "transitional" assistance to get families to leave the benefit rolls. Significantly, Bill Clinton (then as Arkansas governor, later as a presidential candidate and as president) frequently claimed credit for cooperating with Republicans — including Reagan — to get the FSA passed, and for implementing a mandatory work program in his state the same year (Jost 1992: 2).<sup>4</sup> There was little concrete action on AFDC at the federal level during George H.W. Bush's presidency, although his administration

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<sup>4</sup> In his 1995 State of the Union address, Clinton said that as governor in 1988 he "had the honor" of helping President Reagan push through this earlier round of welfare restrictions and work requirements. "We have to make welfare what is what meant to be — a second chance, not a way of life," Clinton added.

During the 1992 campaign, "Clinton claimed that 17,000 Arkansas residents had been successfully moved off the AFDC and food stamp rolls under a state jobs program between 1989 and 1992, although the administrator of the program subsequently acknowledged that 'many people returned to welfare during that period.'" (Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]: 398)

continued the process of approving federal waivers for states to make welfare more stringent, and he offered strong rhetorical backing for such efforts (Jost 1992: 1)

Approaches to reforming welfare that were espoused by mainstream policy experts and political actors throughout the 1980s and 1990s might be grouped into broadly “liberal” and “conservative” camps. Liberal perspectives differed from conservative ones mainly on the mechanisms that were favored to move poor single mothers into the labor force, and the relatively greater tolerance on the part of the former for continued governmental social support focused largely on the well-being of children. Liberal approaches tended to employ more of a “prevention/rehabilitation” paradigm that aimed to encourage the poor to become full market participants: policy proposals were centered on raising the minimum wage, relatively uncontroversial financial supports such as expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, and funding for employment training, education, family planning and services such as child care. Perspectives favored by the broad New Right coalition — and by the conservative New Democrat cadre that came to dominate that party in the neoliberal era — might be grouped under the label “the new paternalism:” these entailed aggressive and punitive use of state power to enforce market-oriented norms and behaviors among the poor — especially strict work requirements, time limits and sanctions for unacceptable conduct — and “deterrence” strategies like elimination of benefits for teenage mothers and family caps (i.e. denying additional aid for women who have children while on welfare), along with large-scale devolution of programs to states and localities (Weaver 2002: 111).

However, the elite-level perspectives that informed policymaking as the neoliberal era proceeded shared a number of fundamental premises centered on the pathologies of government dependency, the cultural deficiencies that were created or exacerbated by reliance on social benefits, and the glorification of private-sector work and market-oriented



lifestyles. The GOP congressional staffer whose book has been dubbed the “definitive inside account” of welfare policy and politics during the Clinton years was probably exaggerating only slightly when he described a near-“consensus” in policymaking circles that had emerged by the mid-1980s that welfare reform must center on mandatory time limits, strict work requirements and a transfer of responsibilities from the federal to state and local administrative levels (Haskins 2006: 14). This shared “neoliberal-paternalist” approach (Soss et al. 2009), which my evidence below and in the next chapter will show was reflected, magnified and amplified in media coverage and elite discourse, became solidified by the capture of much of the Democratic Party apparatus by a faction determined to accommodate itself to the New Right political hegemony.

Clinton burst onto the national scene during the 1992 presidential campaign as the standard-bearer for this emerging breed of conservative Democrats. Their rhetoric combined support for liberal policies on many socio-cultural issues (such as abortion access, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered rights) with an economic and social welfare philosophy that focused on scaling back many aspects of the domestic state, while advocating a role for government assistance in some areas (especially public education, infrastructure investments, health care and programs for senior citizens like Social Security), as well as the use of U.S. military and diplomatic power to lead global efforts against human rights violations like genocide and ethnic cleansing.<sup>5</sup> This faction, centered in the increasingly powerful Democratic Leadership Council, had long taken a conservative stance toward welfare, echoing New Right attacks on dependency and irresponsibility, and advocating

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<sup>5</sup> While the Clinton administration supported and strengthened some aspects of the federal regulatory state — especially in the domain of environmental protection — in many areas it moved aggressively to sever private corporations from public oversight and to encourage market approaches. In addition to advocating neoliberal global trade arrangements like NAFTA, the administration facilitated massive deregulation of the media-telecommunications and financial services industries, in the process breaking commitments by the Democratic Party to key aspects of embedded liberalism dating to the New Deal era (Baker 2007; McChesney 2004).

private market work as the way out of poverty. During the campaign, Clinton himself famously promised to “end welfare as we know it”<sup>6</sup> and often declared that “welfare should be a stepping stone, not a way of life.” (Kellam 1994: 1). During the 1992 election campaign, he called for a two-year cap on welfare, and after the administration’s failed attempt to enact a scheme for universal health care in 1993, it offered a welfare reform plan. This proposal would place time limits on benefits for women born after 1971, institute mandatory work programs, offer supports such as employment training, child care and transportation assistance, and provide government-funded jobs to those unable to find private-sector work after two years. Clinton’s plan — the product of an administration task force he appointed during the summer of 1993 and one of hundreds of welfare reform bills introduced during that year and the next — stalled in the Democratic-controlled Congress by early fall 1994, failing even to reach committee hearings (Meeropol 1998: 247-8; Kellam 1994: 11). In the meantime, the administration sped up the approval of federal waivers for state reforms; by 1996, 40 states had used these waivers to make their welfare programs less generous and more punitive (Meeropol 1998: 248).

However, in November 1994 voters swept into Congress the first bicameral Republican majority since 1948, propelling to power a right-wing leadership cadre spearheaded by Georgia Representative Newt Gingrich and Texas Congressmen Dick Arme and Tom DeLay that saw itself as heir to the Reagan legacy.<sup>7</sup> The political strategy of the so-called “Republican Revolution” Congress centered on a broad set of national policies focused on aggressive targeting of the social welfare and business regulatory state, procedural

<sup>6</sup> As GOP staffer Haskins (2006: 75) wrote of Clinton’s famous turn-of-phrase, “here was a powerful slogan, one that we would have used if we had thought of it first.”

<sup>7</sup> Besides taking control of the House for the first time since 1954, Republicans won the majority of state governorships for the first time in 24 years. The GOP ended Election Night with control of 30 statehouses, including all the largest states except Florida; George W. Bush was elected governor of Texas in 1994.

In light of neo-Gramscian understandings of the cultural role of intellectuals in variously legitimating or challenging dominant political-economic power relations, it is notable that both Gingrich and Arme have professional academic backgrounds (professors of history and economics, respectively).

reforms of government framed as attacks on the power of the liberal federal establishment, a punitive law-and-order approach to crime, and elements of cultural conservatism.<sup>8</sup>

Republicans condensed these ideas in a document called the “Contract With America,” pledging to begin to enact 10 specific provisions as soon as they took power in January 1995 (Haskins 2006: Ch. 4). Among the most important of these policies was what the GOP called the “Personal Responsibility Act” (PRA), a welfare reform proposal that would end the federal guarantee of cash assistance for poor single mothers by transferring much smaller block grants to the states to spend specifically on programs to move the poor into the low-wage private labor market. The PRA would enact work mandates, as well as a limit of two consecutive years for cash welfare receipt and a five-year lifetime cap on benefits, and deny assistance to unwed mothers younger than 18 (Meeropol 1998: 248). It also continued in the vein of Reaganism by including a bold effort to shift more responsibility for social services to the private sector (including religious institutions and for-profit companies).<sup>9</sup>

Clinton vetoed similar versions of this GOP welfare bill twice — once in late 1995 because it was folded into a large budget reconciliation act that included big cuts to Medicaid and Medicare — and once in January 1996. Administration officials claimed that this latter policy was “too extreme” — it included the devolution of the food stamp and Medicaid programs to state authorities, and less federal assistance for disabled children and for programs to help poor women get and keep jobs (Meeropol 1998: 248; Weaver 2002).

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<sup>8</sup> While right-wing evangelical voters, campaign contributors and political groups were central to the success of the Gingrich Congress — and while the rhetoric and policy proposals of many Republican members advanced cultural and moral conservatism — during the campaign the GOP leadership downplayed overtly religious elements so as not to distract from the unifying central concerns of economic and social welfare policy (Haskins 2006: 76).

<sup>9</sup> In general, the philosophy of the bill — and of the 1996 legislation it resulted in — was to afford lower levels of government increased “flexibility,” but only in the direction of enacting tougher provisions on wage-work, time limits and out-of-wedlock births. Thus, the Contract With America version of welfare reform offered states the option of extending the ban on cash benefits to mothers between the ages of 18 and 21 (along with banning benefits for any babies born when the women were in that age range), and to add similar bans on public housing benefits. Haskins (2006: 95-102) discusses how Republican congressional leaders — under the influence of New Right intellectuals such as former Education Secretary William Bennett and Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation — worked to keep strong federal requirements at a time when most governors wanted looser rules.

However, the version of welfare reform that the president signed in August 1996 (during the heat of his re-election campaign against then-Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole) was very similar in its major substantive outlines to the proposal in the Contract With America (Haskins 2006). While it retained federal authority over Medicaid and food stamp (and continued a mandate for some Medicaid eligibility after recipients left the welfare rolls), and while it included somewhat larger funding allotments for day-care services than Republicans preferred, the law crucially did not include guaranteed government-funded jobs for people who could not obtain private-sector work after the time limits (two years consecutive and five years lifetime) were up.<sup>10</sup> PRWORA also provided incentives for religious charities to provide social services, established the first nationwide abstinence-only sex education requirement, and created a massive government effort to collect child-support payments from the fathers of children on welfare.<sup>11</sup>

Consistent with the New Right push for devolution, PRWORA greatly increased discretion for state and local political leaders, administrative personnel and case managers in benefits eligibility and work standards enforcement, which encouraged the reduction or denial of aid according to regional cultural norms and political pressures.<sup>12</sup> Devolution also placed significant obstacles in the way of social movement organizing that during the 1960s had used civil disobedience to liberalize benefits, eliminate some humiliating bureaucratic

<sup>10</sup> At the same time, PRWORA did place a number of new restrictions on food stamp eligibility and benefit levels; the Congressional Budget Office projected that federal savings from these cutbacks (\$23.3 billion over five years) would dwarf expected savings from the cash welfare provisions (\$3.8 billion) (Haskins 2006: 376).

<sup>11</sup> While provisions favored by the New Right to deny benefits to mothers younger than 18 and to ban additional AFDC grants for children born to mothers who are on welfare were not included in the final bill, states were given the option to enact such provisions.

<sup>12</sup> Local- and state-level administration and policy delivery was a key feature of cash welfare from its beginnings during the New Deal, when the Roosevelt administration bowed to pressure from conservative Southern congressional leaders whose support was judged vital to passing the Aid to Dependent Children (ADC) program (later to be renamed AFDC): the program allowed a large measure of local leeway in determining benefit levels and eligibility standards that was often exploited to deny services to black women both inside and outside the South (Quadagno 1994: 119). Thus, the devolution that accompanied the 1996 law was merely a radical extension and elaboration of a policy logic that had always been central to welfare.

routines and impel officials to honor more claims for assistance (Piven and Cloward 1977, 1993 [1971]; Quadagno 1994: 120):

Under the ‘Work First’ banner, which defined the new welfare program, state agencies, and in some places county agencies, or private agencies with whom state and local governments contracted to administer all or parts of the program, were now free to multiply the old-style administrative obstructions to distributing assistance...Waiting rooms were heavily policed. (Piven 2007: 152)<sup>13</sup>

Moreover, the law formalized a broader paradigm shift in social provision that institutionalized the values and practices of neoliberal paternalism: PRWORA encouraged a market culture in welfare agencies that included everything from contracting out services to private corporations (whose profits were tied to denying eligibility for aid and shrinking the number of recipients), the normalization of neoliberal discourse in program offices and brochures,<sup>14</sup> and performance-measurement strategies that incentivized government agencies to compete in cutting welfare rolls (Soss et al. 2009). In addition, PRWORA systematized and lent renewed momentum to a long-running set of coercive practices designed to monitor and control the intimate lives of welfare recipients (mostly single women) so as to enforce “personal responsibility.” (Smith 2007; Soss et al. 2009) Failure to meet behavioral benchmarks would result in sanctions (such as benefits reduction), up to permanent termination of eligibility.

Despite President Clinton’s strong support for the cash welfare portions of the bill, congressional Democrats split nearly evenly on the final conference-committee version of PRWORA. But because of near unanimity within the GOP, the final votes on welfare

<sup>13</sup> Welfare recipients — before and after the 1996 law — are a paradigm case of a policy target group that is constructed as “negative” and “powerless.” “Caseworkers can be quite intrusive in their treatment of clients, but the clients themselves have little agency...Instead of engaging in the outreach typical of policies aimed at the advantaged, social-services offices require clients to apply for program participation in person at overcrowded offices often located far from their homes.” (Ingram 2007: 250)

<sup>14</sup> For instance, recipients must sign ritualistic “Individual Responsibility Plans” and administrators’ “meeting spaces are labeled with titles like ‘The Excellence Room’ and ‘The Opportunity Room.’” (Soss et al. 2009: 24)

reform were overwhelming.<sup>15</sup> PRWORA ultimately amounted to cuts of \$55 billion in federal anti-poverty spending over six years (Meeropol 1998: 248-9). Perhaps most importantly, the basic logic underlying the neoliberal-New Right assault on welfare was institutionalized in a major federal policy vociferously championed by a Democratic president. This narrative claimed that: 1) federal social assistance to the poor was growing to unacceptable levels. 2) such spending was a national fiscal and economic drain, as well as 3) a moral offense to American “producer” sensibilities centered on market work and possessive individualism, and 4) a moral affront to poor people themselves, sapping their dignity, and encouraging social, cultural and personal pathologies. As my evidence in this chapter and the next shows, these core claims were prominently and frequently circulated through political discourse and mass media coverage, with very little criticism or dissent voiced by actors inside or outside the government apparatus.

From a crudely strategic perspective, many Democratic politicians and their advisors saw endorsement of a conservative-oriented welfare reform law as a political tool to appeal to (implicitly white) middle- and working-class constituencies who understood social programs as unfair benefits provided to a permanently unemployed (and, implicitly, mostly black) underclass. According to this analysis, welfare reform would remove from the national agenda a political albatross that was being used by the New Right to attack the larger outlines of progressive economic and social policy — and which, incidentally, was never a very effective anti-poverty program, given its miserly and stigmatizing character — thus allowing the party to devote additional energy to advancing more popular dimensions of the welfare state (Weaver 2002; Soss and Schram 2007; Soss et al. 2009). The extent to which this

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<sup>15</sup> On July 31, 1996, the House passed the bill 328 to 100, with just two Republicans opposed; the Senate followed suit the next day by a 78 to 21 margin that included no GOP dissenters. House Democrats were divided 98 to 98; the margin among Senate Democrats was 25 to 21 in favor.

strategy has succeeded on its own terms in the years since 1996 is highly questionable; I reflect briefly on this in the Conclusion to my study. But there is little doubt that the policy that emerged in part from this strategic calculation — and the political dynamics surrounding that policy, including the largely bipartisan anti-welfare and anti-poor tenor of news coverage and elite discourse that anchored the cultural and communicative environment during the mid-1990s<sup>16</sup> — represented an historic achievement for the Democrats' partisan opponents.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, despite the florid rhetoric on out-of-control public spending and grotesque long-term dependency deployed by the New Right and the New Democrats, the real value of cash welfare benefits actually *declined* by about 42 percent from 1970 through 1992 (Jost 1992: 1).<sup>18</sup> At its peak amidst the recession of the early 1990s, AFDC spending represented less than 1 percent of the federal budget (Meeropol 1998: 224-25; see also Jost 1992).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, even before the 1996 law, the vast majority of stints on welfare were short and were precipitated by crises like job loss, illness or family breakup.<sup>20</sup> Only about four million families at any one time ever received AFDC benefits, but many more people — close to 40 percent of families in the bottom 40 percent of the income distribution — passed through the program over a 10-year period (Baker 2007: 212). On the eve of the welfare reform law, nearly 60 percent of the roughly 38 million people whose income fell

<sup>16</sup> As Ingram (2007: 251) put it, “the discourse associated with welfare reform fed into, rather than contradicted, widespread stereotypes of welfare recipients.”

<sup>17</sup> New Democrats also argued that conservative-leaning reforms would remove the stigma of laziness and irresponsibility associated with welfare in American political culture and mass opinion. Much evidence suggests that this prediction has not been borne out (Soss and Schram 2007).

<sup>18</sup> For example, Haskins (2006: 17) characterized as “beyond dispute” the existence of a “massive welfare state” that provided “hundreds of billions of dollars” in social benefits for low-income people, often “on an entitlement basis.” Programs for the poor grew from the “acorn” of ADC, enacted in 1935, to a “towering oak” (ibid: 40). By 1994, Americans were beset by “a blizzard of social programs and a flood of spending” (ibid: 7)

<sup>19</sup> Instructively, Haskins' (2006: 33) discussion of the causes of this rise in welfare caseloads does not mention the recession, and instead focuses on an increase in non-marital births and the inadequately stringent work requirements of the 1988 FSA. This omission mirrors the larger inattention in media coverage and elite discourse to issues of macroeconomics, and the relationship between state social programs and capitalist markets in general.

<sup>20</sup> The year that PRWORA was enacted, the median length of time that people received AFDC assistance was two years (Sotirovic 2001: 759).

below the official poverty line lived in households where at least one person was employed (Cooper 1995: 2); the norm for those receiving means-tested federal aid was to fall in and out of the low-wage workforce, depending on economic conditions and personal circumstances (in many states, recipients could work part-time and still receive some benefits [ibid: 10]). Moreover, the incidence of aid recipients engaging in market work of some type to supplement their incomes has likely been much higher than official statistics suggest: as Stone (2007: 186) writes, “the vast majority of women on welfare have always worked for money and still do — but they do so under the table, forced to conceal their work in order to get state help.”

As I show below, two key patterns that characterized the neoliberal-New Right tilt in news media coverage stand out starkly against this empirical backdrop: 1) the frequency of arguments depicting welfare receipt as a poisonous dependency and constructing federal benefits programs in general as a threat to fiscal stability and social health, and 2) the virtual disregard of discourse that in any way connected welfare reform to the broader economy and to labor markets in particular.

Furthermore, the evidentiary basis for another key claim of the neoliberal New Right-New Democrat consensus on welfare — that AFDC fueled the trend toward single-motherhood, particularly among African Americans — is very weak. Broader cultural changes in gender and sexual mores across American society— along with economic pressures peculiar to depressed urban ghettos — probably contributed far more to the rise in out-of-wedlock births (Kellam 1994: 15; Piven and Cloward 1987). But, as Haskins (2006: 7) candidly put it, “of course, conservatives did not allow the lack of strong consensus in the social science literature to dull their claims about welfare and illegitimacy. The argument that guaranteed welfare benefits contributed to increased illegitimacy rates makes sense to most



Americans.” How and why these sorts of claims appeared to “make sense” — and how and why counter-arguments appeared not to — is the central matter that I tackle through my empirical analyses of news media coverage and political discourse in this chapter and the next.

### **III. Constructing the Official Spectacle: Clinton vs. Gingrich Takes Center Stage**

My analysis of news content in 1995 and 1996 shows that mainstream media largely continued its coverage patterns from the case of the Reagan economic plan by representing the welfare reform debate as a spectacle (see Debord 2010 [1967], Edelman 1988) or game in which political elites engage in an unprincipled fight for strategic advantage. Like the earlier policy case presented in Chapters 4 and 5, coverage was suffused with an essentially non-substantive narrative that rarely touched on the principled rationales that might motivate political maneuvering, or the larger stakes for citizens, the polity or society as a whole. Thus, the hegemonic mass media again operated in the negative ideological dimension during the welfare reform episode to limit the range of voices largely to political elites, and the range of perspectives largely to frames that were devoid of policy substance. At the same time, media operated in the positive ideological register by presenting a spectacle that resonated with strands of American popular common sense that simultaneously demonize political elites as self-interested bickerers, yet looks to these elites to work for the national interest without encouragement from social activism or public oversight (Hibbing and Thiess-Morse 2002).

This strong emphasis on political gamesmanship, internal legislative procedure and institutional process emerges in a pattern of evidence that comprises a number of news content indicators. Story-level analysis of topical categories — depicted in Figure 6-1 — illustrates that a large plurality of reports (40.4 percent) focused primarily on procedural,

strategic or tactical facets of welfare reform.<sup>21</sup> Thus, reports whose main themes centered on matters such as the competing political strategies of the Clinton White House and the GOP congressional leadership, whether the president would endorse the Newt Gingrich-led Republicans' favored welfare plan and so on, constituted a significant proportion of stories. Like my findings in Chapter 4, these quantitative results on the non-substantive themes of welfare reform stories are in line with those of comparable studies (Cappella and Jamieson 1997; Lawrence 2000).

To be sure, the total number of reports that primarily engaged the substantive design and socioeconomic implications of various legislative initiatives and welfare policy alternatives did outnumber those with a procedural, strategic or tactical theme. However, as I argued in Chapter 4, a news environment in which more than four out of every 10 stories includes little or no content related to policy substance or ideological principles significantly limits the potential emergence and development of mass political knowledge, consciousness and agency: if audiences are rarely exposed to substantive claims about the justifications for and potential effects of public policy, opportunities for effective democratic voice and practice — including expressing opinions that are grounded in concrete information and the consideration of multiple ideological perspectives — are severely compromised.

Moreover, as during debate over the 1981 economic plan, official government sources dominated mainstream media coverage of welfare reform during 1995 and 1996. As seen in Figure 6-2, elite voices from all levels of government comprised 83.4 percent of sources quoted directly or indirectly in *USA Today* and TV stories on the issue. In covering a major overhaul of a policy that had been a lynchpin of federal social provision for decades

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<sup>21</sup> This graph depicts primary foci only. Each story could have up to two foci (and I coded two for the vast majority of reports). Aggregating primary and secondary foci shows that 34.4 percent of the total foci for *USA Today* and TV news reports on welfare reform were essentially non-substantive.

— and on which millions of low-income children, women and men relied — the news presented almost exclusively the voices of national elites of the two major political parties. Non-governmental groups and social movement organizations of any ideological stripe were substantially marginalized: these voices made up just 7.2 percent of total sources in *USA Today* and TV reports. The same was true for academic sources, policy researchers and other ostensibly non-partisan expert voices (just 2.8 percent). And ordinary citizens (including welfare recipients) were largely invisible in mainstream news coverage of welfare reform, comprising just 4 percent of media voices.<sup>22</sup> Thus, even in the context of domestic policy — where, as I argue in Chapter, many predict a greater tendency for media to include nongovernmental groups and citizens (as compared to during foreign or national security policy episodes) — mainstream news afforded elites nearly unchallenged ability to set the terms of debate. In fact, the proportion of governmental sources in coverage of this policy issue again even outpaced that in network TV coverage of the run-up to the Iraq War in 2002 and 2003 (Hayes and Guardino 2010). In general, my findings of elite dominance in welfare coverage are in line with comparable ones from studies of foreign policy debates (e.g., Althaus et al. 1996).<sup>23</sup>

Finally, analysis of the specific source-frames circulated in TV and mass-market print coverage shows a dominant role for procedural, strategic and tactical messages, as seen in Figure 6-3.<sup>24</sup> These frames made up 32.6 percent of the 1,167 messages attributed to sources appearing on major TV news and in *USA Today* across the 20 months of my analysis.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> These findings are consistent with those in Blank-Libra (2004) on the paucity of welfare recipient voices in newspaper treatments and those in Lawrence (2000) on the virtual absence of such sources in national-level media coverage of the reform debate.

<sup>23</sup> However, unlike the 1981 case, sources from the administration were *not* the most frequently quoted voices during the welfare reform episode in 1995 and 1996. I take up this point in the next section.

<sup>24</sup> Figure 6-3 graphs the proportion of total source-frames in *USA Today* and network TV coverage across the period of analysis for those categories that comprised at least 2 percent of all messages.

<sup>25</sup> This total is not much less than that in the 1981 Reagan economic plan episode, where 40 percent of frames fell into this essentially non-substantive category.

Procedural, strategic and tactical messages appeared more than twice as frequently as the next largest frame category, which comprised messages suggesting that welfare encouraged abject dependency and damaged the work ethic of poor people (15 percent). Thus, according to mainstream media coverage, welfare reform was an issue mostly for (generally federal government) elites, who most often communicated messages about political strategy or tactics, and legislative procedure or process, rather than about the content or socioeconomic implications of the policy ideas that were at issue.<sup>26</sup>

This strategic and procedural narrative was reinforced and accentuated as news reporters themselves interjected unsourced statements that went beyond ordinary description. Of all the unsourced frames that I coded in *USA Today* and TV news coverage of welfare reform, non-substantive statements outnumbered all others by many orders of magnitude. Journalists did not include unsourced statements very often — I coded 142 such messages across the 114 stories in the dataset — but when they did, their frames were almost always of a procedural, strategic or tactical nature: such messages comprised 71.1 percent of the total.<sup>27</sup> I do not suggest that the frequency of these messages was high enough for such frames by themselves to have much effect on poll results, but these journalistic expressions — which were perhaps especially powerful because, being unsourced, they had a taken-for-granted character — no doubt punctuated the generally non-substantive narrative presented to news audiences.<sup>28</sup> Thus, as was the case during the 1981 economic plan episode, I argue

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<sup>26</sup> Especially beginning in 1996, *USA Today* and TV news increasingly focused on the presidential election campaign; most of these stories comprised profiles of candidates' personal traits and professional/political careers, or discussions of electoral tactics and strategy, with a few sentences listing issues. Many news reports with the keywords "Clinton" and "welfare" were of this type, so I dropped them from my content analysis dataset.

<sup>27</sup> I coded just the first three unattributed journalistic frames in each story — rather than the first 12, as I did for the source-frames — but most news reports had three or fewer of these messages. The second-largest category of unsourced frames in *USA Today* comprised messages claiming that welfare encourages undignified dependency and poisons the work ethic of low-income people (16.7 percent); in TV reports, the second-most frequent journalistic message consisted of statements that explicitly or implicitly criticized social spending (10 percent).

<sup>28</sup> At the same time, my analysis here sounds a note of caution to arguments claiming that the voices of journalists themselves have taken center stage — often in a stridently anti-elite mode — with the rise of so-called "interpretive reporting" since the 1990s (e.g. Patterson 1994). At least for mainstream daily news coverage of public policy debates (as

that reporters tended to participate in the negative ideological operations that played out during the welfare reform debate not through direct expressions of policy bias, but through presenting interpretations of the issue that reinforced the largely elite-centered, non-substantive spectacle that played out most forcefully through the voices of government officials.<sup>29</sup>

Furthermore, my analysis of overall story foci (see Figure 6-1) illustrates that the greatest number of news reports as a whole suggested that personal (or partisan) political power was mainly what welfare reform was *about*: the most important things to understand were the competing strategies of elites who were in (ostensibly bitter) conflict, the chances for legislative success of one or another policy plan, and the internal institutional pathways through which bills were travelling. Questions of *why* the welfare system should (or should not) be “reformed,” or the likely consequences for low-income people, the economy as a whole, the federal budget or citizens generally were decidedly marginalized in mainstream media coverage. When such factors did appear, they rarely dominated the text of any one story — which likely made it difficult for audiences to glean much substantive policy depth or context — and the terms of debate were almost entirely set by prominent elites, primarily sources from the New Democrat administration of Clinton, and the congressional brain-trust represented by Senate Majority Leader Dole and “Republican Revolution” standard-bearer Gingrich.

However, as during the 1981 economic plan debate, mass media coverage of welfare reform operated not only in the negative ideological dimension — winnowing the range of

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opposed to election coverage, or cable TV, talk radio and internet content), cited sources (especially national political elites) appear to continue to drive the news narrative.

<sup>29</sup> *USA Today* even ran a series of brief pieces during the first months of 1995 that it labeled its “Scorecard on the Contract With America.” These reports consisted of a list of undetailed bullet-style items on major aspects of the new Republican Congress’s agenda, with a short update on the status of each in the legislative process.

voices and perspectives into a dominant narrative of strategic elite conflict — but also in the positive ideological register. Thus, the strategic spectacle of welfare reform as represented in *USA Today* and television news coverage both echoed and solidified culturally resonant conceptualizations of politics-as-petty elite conflict, and the glorification of top-down, non-participatory governance that Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) detected in their survey findings: as Edelman (1988: 97) wrote, “audience interpretations of the spectacle are manifestly constrained...perhaps most fundamentally, by the implications in news reports respecting limits upon the ability of citizens to influence policy. In subtle ways the public is constantly reminded that its role is minor, largely passive, and at most reactive.”

Indeed, my content analysis also illustrates that coverage only sparsely provided factual information that could illuminate the concrete implications of welfare reform. One out of every five *USA Today* stories in 1995 and 1996 did contain some numerical information, often in graphic or tabular form (such as the percentage of teenage single mothers on welfare and the dollar-value of spending cuts proposed by the Clinton administration and Republican Congress). However, only three times across 20 months of coverage did *USA Today* and the major TV news programs offer one crucial piece of information: the percentage of welfare recipients in various racial groups (at the time, about 39 percent of AFDC clients were white and 37 percent were African-American). And just *once* during the policy debate were readers and viewers informed of the *percentage* of the federal budget (or even of domestic spending) that is allocated to AFDC benefits.<sup>30</sup> I do not suggest that these are the only (or even the most) important facts about welfare policy; rather, I simply claim that they are two critical and clearly relevant pieces of information that have been shown to have important implications for public opinion: I chose to code for

<sup>30</sup> This reference came in a January 12, 1995, *ABC World News Tonight* piece, which also included the lone TV citation (across 20 months of coverage) of welfare usage broken down by race and ethnicity.

inclusion of these facts because Americans typically greatly over-estimate the percentage of federal welfare spending — and this over-estimation is linked to support for program cuts (see Kuklinski et al. 2000; Sotirovic 2001) — because scholars have connected racial attitudes and stereotypes with opposition to welfare and redistributive policies generally (e.g. Gilens 1999, 2003; Fording 2003; Quadagno 1994; Gilliam 1999), and because research has detected linkages between racially distorted perceptions of welfare and benefits recipients, on the one hand, and television news and entertainment exposure, on the other (Sotirovic 2001). My findings here underscore the informationally shallow character of mainstream policy news, and call into question the factual grounding of polls on issues like government social spending. I discuss these implications further in the final section of this chapter.

Moreover, as I suggest in the conclusion to this chapter and in Chapter 7, mass media's consistent presentation of welfare reform as a spectacle centered on intense battle among partisan elites (primarily represented by the figures of Clinton and the GOP congressional leadership) obscured the larger substantive agreement that underlay the New Democrat-New Right policy consensus. As I discuss above, the basic goals, mechanisms and animating logics of welfare reform as understood by the conservative Democratic faction led by Clinton, and by the Republican Revolution Congress and its allies, were the very similar.<sup>31</sup> News outlets' rendering of this episode as a fierce partisan battle between the towering personalities of Gingrich and Clinton likely suggested to audiences that the two sides held fundamental and principled policy disagreements, but rarely did such coverage illuminate just what these differences were. Instead, elite conflict tended to be framed mainly as a matter of crude partisan politics and personal power. Thus, in addition to possibly cultivating popular cynicism and fatalistic withdrawal from public affairs, the elite-focused spectacle of welfare

<sup>31</sup> As Haskins (2006: 39), the GOP congressional staffer, acknowledged, "Clinton's promises during the campaign were compatible with the very proposals that House Republicans had been developing."

coverage achieved the additional ideological goal of offering a legitimization of the democratic nature of two-party institutional politics, thus obscuring an underlying unity of perspective during the neoliberal era: as was the case to a somewhat lesser extent during the 1981 economic policy episode, the message here was that while strident elite political conflict may be distasteful, diverse voices and perspectives receive a hearing in important policy debates.

In sum, the evidence from this stage of my analysis suggests that hegemonic mass media operated in the negative ideological dimension in part simply by limiting the substantive discourse on welfare reform that was circulated to mass audiences. In the positive ideological register, this news discourse resonated with major currents of American popular common sense that depict governing elites exclusively as strategic, self-interested actors, that define politics as an activity for officials and experts, and that construct policymaking as a sometimes ugly process that nevertheless entails a democratic airing of diverse views. These patterns are consistent with those that emerged from my analysis of mainstream media coverage during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic plan — and they carry similar potential implications for the depoliticization of popular constituencies during the neoliberal era, and the exacerbation of steep class-based inequities in civic knowledge and engagement.

However, news content during this policy episode was not entirely non-substantive from a policy or overtly ideological standpoint. Much like the earlier case, when media voices did talk about the concrete shape, material or social stakes, and ideological underpinnings of welfare reform, New Right-New Democrat sources and viewpoints centered on neoliberal-paternalist themes dominated the debate. This depiction of the range of legitimate welfare discussion carried crucial implications for how Americans understand the relationship of the



state to the market economy. I turn next to the evidence underpinning this thread of my argument.

#### **IV. The New Right-New Democrat Welfare Consensus: Government is Still the Problem**

When it comes to substantive policy content and more explicitly ideological messages, my analysis of welfare reform coverage in *USA Today* and on television news shows a media discourse shaded significantly toward the right. Thus, when stories attributed substantive messages to political actors, those actors were more likely to represent groups (such as the Republican Party) whose members almost unanimously supported cuts in aid, relaxation of federal AFDC benefit standards, strict work requirements and time limits, and punitive sanctions designed to enforce desirable behaviors among recipients, than from groups whose members criticized or at least were ambivalent about such measures (such as the congressional Democratic caucus or progressive nongovernmental organizations). This dynamic, which along most of my content indicators was very similar to the debate over the Reagan economic plan of 1981 as represented in Associated Press and network TV reports of the time, emerged despite the fact that Democrats controlled the White House in 1995 and 1996, and presidential administrations are often thought to set the public policy news agenda and even influence the tone of coverage. Indeed, most of the substantive messages on welfare reform attributed to Clinton administration officials in the news mimicked (in occasionally softened rhetoric) seminal New Right frames criticizing pathological welfare dependency and the federal government in general. Here, the mainstream media operated in the negative ideological dimension by limiting the range of substantive policy discourse largely to voices and frames congenial to the right-of-center political forces ascendant during the neoliberal era. These hegemonic frames worked in the positive ideological register by

activating key strands of popular common sense demonizing welfare state bureaucracies and social provision, and privileging citizenship in racialized and gendered ways according to productive capacity in private markets. I elaborate on these positive ideological processes in Chapter 7.

As seen in Figure 6-2, Republican elites were the most frequently cited sources in welfare reform stories. GOP voices outnumbered all others by a significant margin: in all *USA Today* and TV news reports on the issue from January 1, 1995, through August 22, 1996, Republicans made up 37 percent of sources, compared to 30.4 percent for Clinton administration sources, and just 10.5 percent for other Democratic Party voices.<sup>32</sup>

Interestingly, however, breaking down source categories into partisan camps — thus, adding administration voices to those of other Democratic officials and then comparing them to GOP sources — results in a relatively even balance (40.9 percent Democratic, 37 percent Republican).

This partisan equilibrium in news sources across close to 20 months of policy coverage is a particularly stark illustration of mainstream media's professional norm of "balance," under which good reporting is defined by giving "both sides" of each debate an equal chance to publicize their views (Hacker and Pierson 2005b: 178-9). In the U.S. two-party system, the representatives of these sides are almost always national Republican and Democratic elites. This concept of balance is part of a larger web of implicit assumptions that drives major media coverage under the norm of "presumed democracy" theorized by Bennett (1993b). Journalists from time to time engage in investigative reporting aimed at

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<sup>32</sup> Haskins (2006: 89-91) discusses GOP media strategy on welfare reform, crediting much of the party's success to the work of communications aide Ari Fleischer. For example, Fleischer urged that congressional leaders repeat that the status quo was "a failed welfare system" that Republicans "had a plan to fix" ... and similar big ideas dressed up in simple language." (ibid: 90) "Ari was a master at using arguments and evidence to support any position Republicans wanted to adopt," Haskins wrote (ibid: 91). Fleischer later became President George W. Bush's press secretary.

uncovering abuses by individual officials (although such reporting may be on the wane in the current media industry climate [Fox and Gangl 2011]), and (perhaps increasingly with the rise of entertainment criteria in the news) they may produce negatively toned, scandal-themed campaign stories. However, when it comes to public policy coverage, news media generally assume that the two parties accurately represent the spectrum of citizen views and faithfully advocate for their constituents' interests, and thus the interests of the nation as a whole (see also Bennett's [1990, 1996] indexing hypothesis).

Consequently, mainstream journalists view their democratic duty as fulfilled when they peg stories to the voices of prominent political elites. News coverage of welfare reform seemed to follow this practice especially closely: if national Democratic and Republican officials generally supported scaling back welfare and imposing strict employment and behavioral requirements on recipients, then such a consensus must exist among the general public as well, the reasoning goes. Thus, media in this case seemed to take the views of major-party elites as a proxy for the range of legitimate ideological and policy debate, and challenging frames were largely relegated to what Hallin (1994) has termed the "sphere of deviance."

In addition to the elite Republican Party and New Democrat dominance among sources in *USA Today* and TV news coverage, frames broadly favoring neoliberal-New Right perspectives on welfare outnumbered themes that cut against this ideological current 40.5 percent to 12.5 percent, as depicted in Figure 6-3. Put another way, 71.9 percent of clearly valenced frames (i.e. those tending to support or tending to oppose the proposed neoliberal-paternalist welfare regime) favored broadly conservative views. The most frequent of these substantive policy messages was the frame I label "work ethic/dependency," which consists of statements that depicted AFDC receipt as a negative influence on poor people, damaging

their personal initiative and desire to support themselves through private-sector work, and otherwise creating an unfair economic and social burden on other citizens and on government. These messages made up 15 percent of total source-frames in *USA Today* and TV coverage. In contrast, just nine times in 114 stories over nearly two years did a source express criticism of or opposition to this message; such statements represented 0.8 percent of total source-frames. My content analysis here lends a systematic foundation to Fording's (2003: 83) assertion that "by the 1990s the rhetoric of both Democrats and Republicans had come to reflect a belief that AFDC was ineffective, and that the program actually exacerbated poverty by providing work disincentives and by promoting a generally irresponsible lifestyle."

This frame is concisely illustrated by an assertion from House Ways and Means Committee Chairman Bill Archer of Texas, a prominent GOP leader in the drive to curtail benefits and institute work requirements: "Welfare was not meant to be a way of life," he said. As I discuss in Section II, social program dependency — and the deviancies that it allegedly enables, from sexual irresponsibility and the breakdown of the nuclear family to alcoholism and illegal drug use to a general lack of respect for self and community — has been a powerful New Right theme at least since the 1960s. Conservative forces have tied these ideas to the alleged failure of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty and Great Society programs, constructing a powerful discourse that connects social pathology to a large, expensive, intrusive and ineffective federal government.

However, by the mid-1990s, the welfare dependency/work ethic message was a thoroughly bipartisan theme. As Clinton intoned in his first address to a joint session of Congress in February 1993, "no one wants to change the welfare system as much as those who are trapped by it. It's time to end welfare as a way of life." As illustrated by Shannon

Lloyd's parents in the news story described in the introduction, in this narrative AFDC recipients were cast as passionate advocates for a get-tough, austere approach to welfare. But (as I discuss in Chapter 7), during the 1995-1996 debate their voices usually were filtered through major political elites, frequently including the nation's top elected official.<sup>33</sup> My analysis of mainstream media coverage demonstrates clearly the prevalence of these messages in elite Democratic — not just Republican — rhetoric. As seen in Figure 6-4, among all substantive policy frames circulated by Clinton administration sources in *USA Today* and TV coverage, the work ethic/dependency theme was the most prominent, comprising 14.8 percent of messages.<sup>34</sup> Mainstream print and television news coverage heavily emphasized the pathological trap of welfare dependency despite the fact that at the time more than a third of all families were on AFDC for one year or less, and more than 78 percent left the rolls before five years; just 6.8 percent of families received AFDC benefits for 10 years or more.<sup>35</sup> Leaving aside for the moment an interrogation of the dubious social and cultural assumptions at the heart of the dependency frame (I explore these in the next chapter), the consistent, bipartisan focus on this idea likely suggested to news audiences that long-term welfare receipt was an objectively widespread (and expensive) phenomenon.

The work ethic/welfare dependency frame was closely linked to a more general neoliberal New Right-New Democrat theme targeting federal spending, social welfare and

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<sup>33</sup> In a qualitative analysis of congressional debate and media discourse centered on the proposal by some GOP leaders that states be encouraged to place the children of unwed teenage mothers who lose AFDC eligibility in group homes or orphanages, Asen (1996) argues that the perspectives and experiences of welfare recipients were virtually excluded; instead, other voices — primarily government officials and policy experts — told recipients' stories for them, effectively constructing a stereotype that legitimated elite policy goals. Alphonso Jackson, head of the Dallas Public Housing Authority, recounted a visit to an apartment inhabited by a woman and her 15-year-old daughter, who had just given birth: "the new grandmother was listening to music on the radio with several men 'who looked like they were on drugs. They were laughing about the baby. They thought it was funny. The chances of that baby ever having a productive life are almost nil.'" (ibid: 300) Jackson was later to become U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development during the second Bush administration.

<sup>34</sup> Figure 6-4 depicts all Clinton administration source-frames that made up more than 2 percent of administration messages. As in my dataset as a whole, procedural, strategic and tactical frames comprised the largest category of administration statements (34.8 percent).

<sup>35</sup> These data are from the news story described in the introduction. Information on how long welfare recipients stay in the program appeared in *USA Today* coverage just three times, all in 1995.

business regulatory programs, and oversight of state and local social policy. Indeed, my quantitative evidence suggests the importance of this connection in news coverage of welfare reform: at 14.8 percent, messages generally criticizing federal programs, regulations and spending were nearly as prevalent in *USA Today* and TV coverage during 1995 and 1996 as were instances of the dependency frame (see Figure 6-3). This tally is more than double that of messages supporting federal social spending and oversight (6 percent).

During the welfare reform debate, the anti-government theme — long a staple of New Right discourse and given perhaps its most concise and famous expression by a major political elite in Reagan’s assertion in his first inaugural address that “government is not the solution to our problem; government is the problem” — often took concrete form in calls by GOP leaders to cede federal spending and regulatory authority to states and localities. This devolution initiative was grounded in assertions that lower levels of government could tailor policies to the specific socioeconomic needs and cultural tastes of their regions, and could run welfare programs more efficiently than demonized (and implicitly left-of-center) federal bureaucrats. Critics (rarely heard from in mainstream news) worried that loosening federal benefits standards and oversight would allow more conservative state governments to shortchange needy residents, exposing welfare spending to the storms of state budget politics, where economic downturns might exacerbate poverty as local elites declined to allocate resources beyond set federal block grants just when the need for social assistance was greatest.

But, as with the work ethic/dependency theme, deployment of the anti-federal government message was a bipartisan exercise during the welfare reform episode (although it occasionally took a somewhat less harsh tone in the mouths of Democratic elites).

According to my analysis of evening TV news and *USA Today* coverage, President Clinton

never publicly opposed turning over AFDC to the states and loosening federal standards for welfare assistance (although he did advocate for more Washington oversight than did GOP leaders). Clinton’s message on the role of government in domestic social policy is often understood as a split-the-difference, nuanced rhetoric advocating the need to downsize federal programs and make government less expensive and more efficient, but to retain key areas of public spending and policy oversight: as he said in unveiling his “New Covenant” philosophy in the 1995 State of the Union speech, “we should not ask government to do what we should do for ourselves. We should rely on government as a partner to help us do more for ourselves and for each other.” He also from time to time criticized Republican-crafted welfare cuts as “too tough on kids,” although this was usually followed by the trope “too weak on work.”

However, my analysis of *USA Today* and TV coverage shows that the anti-government strand of Clinton administration welfare discourse was much more prevalent than was the current advocating a retention of federal spending and oversight roles. At 14 percent, this anti-government frame comprised the second-most frequent substantive policy message circulated by administration sources (see Figure 6-4). In contrast, messages supporting the federal government’s role comprised just 6.3 percent of Clinton administration communications, representing a total of just 23 separate statements in 114 stories across 20 months of news coverage. Moreover, Clinton administration statements arguing that GOP welfare reform initiatives would harm children by shredding pieces of the federal safety net that ought to protect them if their parents’ benefits are cut off made up just 9 percent of messages from these sources in *USA Today* and TV coverage. This total is not much larger than the proportion of administration messages (7.4 percent) claiming that get-tough welfare policies would help children by encouraging responsible parenting, the

cultivation of discipline and “family values.” In fact, the balance of administration discourse on welfare reform as represented in TV news and *USA Today* coverage was tilted sharply in the conservative direction: neoliberal-New Right themes characterized 40 percent of administration statements, compared to 13.4 percent for frames challenging these ideas.

The extent to which the overall terms of debate on economic and social welfare policy — and on AFDC in particular — shifted under the neoliberal-New Right hegemony is also apparent in a closer look at oppositional framing among Democratic elites. Most non-administration Democratic Party voices that appeared in mass media coverage during 1995 and 1996 criticized or questioned the conservative attacks on welfare. But according to mainstream news coverage, the single-most frequent critic of the neoliberal-paternalist drive for welfare reform was none other than New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan, who, as I note above, planted many of the intellectual seeds for the neoliberal attack on AFDC with his 1965 report on the sources of government dependency in the female-dominated culture of urban black America. On the eve of Senate passage of welfare reform, CNN called Moynihan a “longtime liberal welfare champion.” Similarly, a September 19, 1995, *NBC Nightly News* report labeled the him “the party’s leading voice on welfare.” Moynihan accounted for fully 10.6 percent of all non-administration Democratic officials cited in *USA Today*, and for 8.5 percent of total oppositional messages on welfare reform that appeared in the paper. Haskins (2006: 9), the GOP aide who was instrumental in the policy discussions that led to PRWORA, noted the irony of Moynihan’s role as “perhaps the leading opponent of the Republican welfare reform legislation.” In the next chapter, I discuss the ideological meaning of the shift signaled by Moynihan’s voice in the 1995-1996 debate.

My directional thrust analysis — which, as explained in Chapter 3, relies on a global measure of news slant that captures the balance of sources and frames, journalistic tone, and



the implicit policy and ideological assumptions of each report — perhaps most starkly illustrates the rightward tilt of welfare reform coverage on TV and in *USA Today*. As seen in Figure 6-5, while I coded more than a quarter of the stories “neutral,” reports that were either “very” or “somewhat favorable” toward welfare cutbacks, work requirements and related measures outpaced those that were “very” or “somewhat unfavorable” 63.1 percent to 11.4 percent. Put another way, more than five times as many print and TV stories were generally favorable toward benefit cutbacks, work mandates and punitive sanctions across the 20 months of analysis as were unfavorable.

Of course, news coverage of welfare reform was not monolithic — more than one in every 10 stories clearly tilted against the proposed welfare regime, and dissenting voices and frames were sprinkled throughout many other reports that were published or aired during the episode. Moreover, less than 10 percent of stories fell on the more extreme right edge of the debate: in keeping with the professional norms and practices of mainstream journalism, most reports included some frame and source diversity (even if only manifested in major-party elites), and the heavy procedural, strategic and tactical bent of coverage meant that a substantial proportion of stories had little explicit left-right ideological content (although, as I argue above and in Chapter 4, such reports carry more subtle ideological implications). As was the case during debate over the 1981 economic plan, the evidence on welfare reform shows that hegemonic processes as observed in news media and political discourse always include a measure of explicit and implicit opposition. Indeed, such processes may owe much of their effectiveness to the fact that criticism is not entirely shut out: instead, opposition is channeled and controlled through subtle mechanisms grounded in material dynamics, institutional constraints and cultural understandings. I discuss some of these broader underpinnings of hegemony in Chapter 9.

Interestingly, my quantitative content analysis shows that the racial implications of welfare reform were not an explicit part of political debate as depicted in *USA Today* or TV stories. As seen in Figure 6-1, none of the 114 news reports on the issue that appeared over the 20 months of analysis carried either a primary or secondary focus on the racial dimensions of welfare reform. Moreover, none of the sources who appeared in any of these stories invoked an explicitly racial frame when talking about the issue. In fact, the only times that race appeared explicitly in *USA Today* coverage of welfare reform during 1995 and 1996 were on two occasions when the racial breakdown of AFDC recipients was included in graphical and tabular packages at the end of stories whose text did not invoke race. Racial dimensions also were not an explicit factor in television coverage. However, I did note that many TV reports on the issue included video shots of African Americans who were depicted as either current or former welfare recipients (again, only rarely were these recipients afforded a platform to speak for themselves); 24.1 percent of the total TV reports in my dataset included at least one visual depiction of black people as past or present public assistance clients.<sup>36</sup>

Still, at least as manifest within the textual and verbal messages of mainstream news coverage, race was essentially invisible as a conceptual category for organizing media discourse on welfare reform.<sup>37</sup> This dynamic at least avoids the invocation of explicit racial stereotypes. But the suppression of race as a direct frame in news coverage is troubling in that it allows for avoiding public discussion that touches on the complex connections

<sup>36</sup> Many of these reports also included footage of welfare recipients of other races; regrettably, I did not collect data on the percentage of TV depictions of recipients categorized by race across the period of analysis.

<sup>37</sup> This finding differs considerably from the evidence in Gilens' (1999) important work on media representations and the racial dimensions of U.S. poverty policy. Two potential reasons for this apparent empirical disjuncture come to mind. First, Gilens coded news photographs accompanying stories about poverty or welfare. I based my quantitative analyses on only the text and verbal utterances in news reports. Second, while Gilens presented an analysis of decades' worth of media coverage beginning in the 1950s, I focus on the specific period during the mid-1990s when the intermittent national policy debate about reforming welfare reached its apex. By this time — as I argued in Chapters 2 and 5 regarding the shape of New Right discourse in general — racial frames in mainstream popular culture (including news coverage) were unlikely to be direct or explicit.

between racial relations, the welfare system, poverty and material opportunity, including the roles of political-economic structures and public policies (Schram 2003).<sup>38</sup> However, the lack of explicit attention to racial dimensions in media coverage does not mean that race was absent as an ideological and cultural marker for welfare policy debate. I discuss some of these subtler racial dimensions in the critical discourse analyses I offer in Chapter 7.

Finally — and perhaps most importantly for the larger implications of media discourse and the dynamics of popular consent — mainstream news coverage of welfare reform virtually ignored discussion of the connections between government social provision and the private economy. As seen in Figure 6-1, less than 1 percent of the 114 print and TV news stories I analyzed carried a primary focus on the macroeconomic dimensions of welfare, broadly defined.<sup>39</sup> And, consider what I label the “job creation” source-frame, which suggests that the best way to help people avoid turning to government social assistance would be to launch policies to create more and better employment opportunities, and which stresses the need to foster these opportunities specifically for AFDC recipients. Amidst the apparently booming 1990s economy, this message appeared just four times across 20 months of TV and *USA Today* news coverage.<sup>40</sup> This dynamic reinforced the dominant work ethic/dependency and anti-federal government frames: such patterns of discourse inscribe the larger neoliberal-New Right theme of the (inefficient, pathological) welfare state and the (dynamic, wholesome) private market as binary and mutually independent opposites — and consequently, the idea that poor people *choose* “welfare over work.” In the next chapter, I

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<sup>38</sup> Of course, this kind of structural contextualization of social problems — what Iyengar (1991) calls “thematic” framing — is probably very rare in U.S. mass media coverage generally.

<sup>39</sup> This total increases to 1.4 percent if we include both primary and secondary story foci.

<sup>40</sup> By this time, real wages for low- and middle-income people had been stagnant for at least two decades, and it was far from clear that most AFDC recipients were qualified for the bulk of the newly created jobs of the Clinton recovery (Cooper 1995). In fact, several statements in the single *USA Today* story that primarily focused on the macroeconomic implications of welfare reform suggested as much.

discuss the concealed contradictions of these ideological constructions in the context of neoliberal political-economic power relations.

In sum, my analyses show that when mainstream news coverage of welfare reform in 1995 and 1996 included substantive policy discussion and explicitly ideological messages about government social provision, the overall narrative was tilted decidedly in favor of key New Right themes, even if some of this rhetoric was manifested in softer New Democrat tones. Despite the White House being in Democratic hands, GOP sources actually made up the largest category of voices in the news; right-of-center frames on welfare — led by anti-dependency and anti-federal government messages — overwhelmed opposing frames; and the overall thrust of coverage was tilted toward the emerging conservative hegemony. This pattern of evidence illustrates ideology's negative register, as news media filtered and narrowed the range of public voices and perspectives to support dominant power arrangements. In evincing connections to key strands of American popular common sense centered on anti-welfare-statism and the normalization of market relations, the specific messages appearing in welfare reform coverage also illustrate ideology's positive dimension. I discuss these potential activations of common sense in Chapter 7.

These more explicitly ideological dynamics worked in concert with the general elite-centered, procedural, strategic and tactical narrative depicted in Section III to marginalize nongovernmental advocates and ordinary citizens (including AFDC recipients) in service to an anti-welfare discourse that accommodated the neoliberal ascendancy in the larger political economy. Just as neo-Gramscian understandings of hegemony would predict, news coverage of welfare reform was not homogenous — alternative frames and challenging voices did appear — but the conventions of mainstream journalism helped to construct a mass

communications environment that, while thoroughly “democratic” according to its own standards, nevertheless functioned as a mechanism of ideological power.

### **V. TV vs. Print: Hegemonic News Discourse in Pictures and Words**

In general, the fabric of mainstream media coverage during the welfare reform episode of 1995 and 1996 was similar across television and print news formats: my analyses of sources, messages and story themes in both evening news programs and *USA Today* coverage indicates the centrality of elite-based procedural, strategic and tactical coverage that mostly avoided policy substance, combined with a significant slant toward right-wing frames and reporting perspectives. These findings add to those from my analyses of the 1981 Reagan economic program in Chapter 4 to suggest that the ideological operations of media hegemony primarily constitute a political-economic phenomenon, rather than one grounded in technically determined news production and distribution practices. Still, a few notable differences did emerge in my examination of evening TV news and *USA Today* stories on welfare reform.

Stories focused primarily on government spending and taxation were significantly more frequent on TV (comprising 22 percent of all reports) than in print (10 percent). In contrast, reports focused on the gender and family implications of welfare reform were a good deal more prominent in the newspaper (21.7 percent) than on television (12.9 percent). These reports, which most often dealt with pregnancy and motherhood among teenage welfare recipients, so-called “deadbeat dads” who refused to financially support their progeny, and, occasionally, the negative impacts of benefit cuts and strict work requirements on needy children, perhaps lent to print coverage a more humanistic face than that presented

by TV news.<sup>41</sup> This interpretation is borne out by my finding that a somewhat larger proportion of the voices in newspaper coverage came from outside official government circles (17.3 percent, as compared to 14.9 percent for TV).

However, the general similarities between television and print treatment of welfare reform are more striking than the differences. A large plurality of reports in both formats were concerned mainly with governmental procedure, political strategy and elite tactics (38.3 percent for print and 42.6 percent for TV). Similarly, the vast majority of news sources in both formats came from government (82.7 percent for print, 85.1 percent for TV, although this latter figure is a bit lower than that for television coverage of the 1981 economic policy debate). And by far the greatest number of specific messages disseminated in both formats was concerned with procedure, strategy and tactics (34.1 percent for TV and 30 percent for print). Thus, whether people were reading mass-market newspapers in the morning or watching mainstream TV news during the evening, the language of sports, battle and show business predominated in a communications landscape overwhelmingly peopled by high-profile partisan governing elites; the policy substance and social impacts of welfare reform took a decided back seat; and the focus on official actors motivated primarily by personal and partisan power removed welfare from the concerns of ordinary people, implicitly denying social and political agency not only to aid recipients but also to the broader population of low- and middle-income citizens, whose political and socioeconomic stakes in the issue were obscured. Moreover, the perspectives of citizens as expressed in their own voices (even if sometimes paraphrased by journalists) were heavily marginalized in both formats: people who did not hold official capacities appeared as news sources in *USA Today*

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<sup>41</sup> However, aggregating primary and secondary story foci shows that public spending and taxation were still a large part of the discourse in print. In fact, I coded a slightly larger percentage of combined primary and secondary newspaper foci (26.3 percent) as pertaining to these issues than I did for TV coverage (25.5 percent). This suggests that while more *USA Today* stories mainly focused on gender and family issues, a significant share of these reports paid substantial attention to another dimension of welfare reform, including government spending and taxation.

welfare reform coverage just 20 times over 20 months of coverage, and just 28 times on television news.<sup>42</sup>

Mainstream TV and print news was also remarkably similar in terms of the right-left tenor of welfare reform coverage. Generally right-leaning messages outnumbered generally left-leaning frames by nearly four-to-one on TV (40.5 percent to 13.2 percent) and by more than three-to-one in *USA Today* (38.4 percent to 11.2 percent). These tallies are very close to those that emerged from my analysis of similar news outlets during the 1981 tax and budget episode. In addition, I coded more than 60 percent of stories in both formats as generally favorable to the conservative welfare reform push; small minorities of reports were generally unfavorable (66.7 percent favorable to 14.8 percent unfavorable on TV, 60 percent favorable to 8.3 percent unfavorable in print). It is also striking that I could plausibly categorize just two television reports over 20 months of coverage as “very unfavorable,” and I could find *no* stories in *USA Today* during the period of analysis that fit such a profile. To be sure, I coded significantly more print coverage as “neutral” (i.e. not generally favoring or criticizing the conservative changes to welfare) — 31.7 percent of *USA Today* stories fell into that category, as compared to 18.5 percent on TV.<sup>43</sup> But, as was the case in the 1981 debate, while many of these neutral stories lacked policy substance, they did not lack potential ideological implications: the focus in most such reports on government procedure and elite strategic or tactical maneuvering reinforced the political spectacle that detached ordinary citizens and their socioeconomic conditions from the discourse and actions of the powerful in Washington, D.C.

<sup>42</sup> Ordinary people appeared more frequently on TV — 4.9 percent of the total, compared to 3.2 percent for print (the latter number is skewed by the fact that nearly half the sources appeared in one *USA Today* story that generally painted a favorable picture of the neoliberal-New Right welfare agenda; removing those lowers the proportion of ordinary citizen voices in print to 2.1 percent).

<sup>43</sup> This finding is contrary to my analysis of the 1981 economic policy debate, where network television circulated more such neutral reports than did the Associated Press.

Journalists also followed norms of partisan balance very closely in both TV and print coverage of welfare reform: the numbers of Republican and Democratic sources were nearly even in *USA Today* coverage (237 GOP voices, 236 Democratic); on evening television news, Democrats outnumbered GOP sources 43.6 percent to 35.5 percent. However, crucially, TV news cited Democrats who were not part of the Clinton administration about half as frequently as did print coverage; just 6.9 percent of total sources fell into this category, compared to 13.8 percent in *USA Today* coverage. Since administration discourse heavily favored conservative changes to welfare, the effect of this dynamic was to privilege such themes more heavily on TV than in print, thus narrowing the extent of policy contestation even further than was the case in *USA Today*.

Many popular and some academic accounts emphasize differences between U.S. mainstream television and print news coverage of public policy, often describing the latter as more substantively informative, contextually rich, and diverse in its range of sources and ideological arguments than the former (e.g. Iyengar 1991; Sotirovic 2001). My findings from both the 1981 and 1995-1996 case studies offer some tentative support for this view. All in all, however, the evidence from unusually detailed and comprehensive analyses of news discourse during two of the most crucial domestic policy debates of the neoliberal era call such a perspective into question, at least as applied to mass-market outlets (as opposed to so-called prestige newspapers such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post* and *Wall Street Journal*, which draw much smaller and narrower audiences).<sup>44</sup> Thus, in the context of potential direct effects on policy opinion among broad swaths of the American public — and consequently, the signaling of popular consent for the market-centric elite political goals

<sup>44</sup> Some recent research indicates that U.S. mass-market print and mainstream TV news coverage of foreign policy issues is also similar along these dimensions: according to unpublished data from the project reported in Hayes and Guardino (2010), distributions of news sources, pro- and anti-Iraq War arguments, and other elements were generally very close in an analysis of all relevant network news stories and a large random sample of *USA Today* reports over an eight-month period (data are available from the authors upon request).



and governing agendas that have characterized the epoch — it seems clear that mainstream print and TV news operated very similarly as hegemonic mechanisms.

## **VI. Discussion and Conclusion: News Coverage, Public Opinion and Mass Consent for Welfare Reform**

My analysis of welfare reform coverage in *USA Today* and on major television news during 1995 and 1996 depicts a mass communications environment that was decidedly favorable to the neoliberal-New Right hegemony. This dynamic emerges in the media's amplification of specific sources and frames advocating benefits retrenchment, the reduction of federal program oversight and the coercion of clients into private labor markets, as well as in a broader narrative that naturalized an elite-managed political spectacle that centered on personal and partisan strategic advantage, and sidelined policy substance and non-official voices. Central to media coverage of this historic episode in the overall rightward drift of U.S. domestic policy under neoliberalism was a heavy focus on messages depicting welfare receipt as poisonous dependency that breeds social deviance and economic irresponsibility. Thus, mainstream news coverage operated in the *negative* ideological dimension — limiting and constraining the substantive voices and policy perspectives available to mass audiences.

At the same time, coverage was not homogenous: critical voices and frames did appear in the news as a manifestation of contemporary mainstream media's professional norm of balance. But for the most part, these messages were attributed to elites — Democratic members of Congress and, occasionally, Clinton administration sources — rather than to nongovernmental advocates or policy experts, who would have been more likely to widen the discourse on welfare in progressive (and potentially counter-hegemonic) directions. Especially striking was the thoroughly bipartisan character of the work ethic/dependency theme — and, to a somewhat lesser extent, the anti-federal government

frame. Despite some accounts to the contrary, the New Democrat administration of Bill Clinton focused heavily on messages about public social provision that were friendly to the neoliberal-New Right hegemony that penetrated mainstream national politics with Ronald Reagan's ascendancy to the White House in 1981. Moreover, ordinary citizens — including current and former aid recipients — were marginalized in news coverage nearly to the point of irrelevance, except for a few cases in which “success stories” were held up as exemplars of the beneficial effects of punitive and austere policies. This mass communications climate likely had important implications for how people answered poll questions about the issue, thus shaping a climate of opinion that appeared to communicate popular consent for the major retrenchment of the welfare state enacted in 1996.

Surveys conducted during the period leading up to and comprising the debate over PRWORA generally indicated strong support for the key neoliberal-paternalist components of the law, especially strict requirements that recipients engage in wage labor, stringent time limits, and sanctions to punish or deter unacceptable behaviors, such as teenage pregnancy. Generally unfavorable attitudes toward the federal welfare system — and toward AFDC in particular — had been detected in polls beginning in the mid- to late-1960s, but these reported sentiments hit an all-time high during the mid-1990s (Weaver 2002; Weaver et al. 1995; Pereira and Van Ryzin 1998). Table 6-1 shows results from a number of commercial and academic surveys on welfare policy conducted during this period.<sup>45</sup> In addition to strong support for particular conservative policy components that were to be enshrined in PRWORA, these surveys indicate a pattern of underlying public orientations and beliefs centered on the pathologies (and the prevalence) of long-term government dependency, the

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<sup>45</sup> Data in this table are from academic and commercial polls reported in Weaver et al. (1995), and from surveys conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, accessed from the organization's website: <http://people-press.org/>.

ineffectiveness of the current welfare system, the over-generosity of benefits and individualistic explanations for poverty. This reading of public opinion has led political actors, observers and scholars to conclude that the 1996 law was a relatively unproblematic instance of elites democratically responding to mass sentiment against the welfare system.<sup>46</sup> However, several factors advise caution in accepting such claims.

First, reported public attitudes toward government programs for the poor have long depended on specific question wording. In particular, poll items asking about “welfare” spending have elicited highly negative reactions, while those probing attitudes toward “assistance to the poor” or similar constructions, and those that specifically mention sympathetic groups like “poor children,” have often garnered majority support (Weaver et al 1995; Gilens 1999; Weaver 2002).<sup>47</sup> This strongly suggests that framing and priming processes have worked for years to affect reported opinions toward welfare: question-wording — and news discourse, as I discuss below — has consistently activated unfavorable considerations drawn from popular common sense, perhaps making such associations chronically accessible for majorities of survey respondents. In other words, hearing the word “welfare” may bring up a host of negatively valenced thoughts, images and stereotypes that had been consistently primed and elaborated over years of hegemonic socialization through media and other mechanisms.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, concrete knowledge of government policy that

<sup>46</sup> In a particularly strong statement of this view, Haskins (2006: 2) wrote that, “the American people appear to have rejected some of the most fundamental tenets of liberal social policy, if indeed they ever agreed with them.”

In an otherwise perceptive political history of the era, Wilentz (2008: 364-7) endorses the idea that Clinton (wisely) responded to majority opinion in supporting conservative welfare reform. In my view, his treatment seriously overstates both the concrete policy differences and the rhetorical divergences between Gingrich Republicans and Clintonite New Democrats on the issue.

<sup>47</sup> Reported public perceptions of the targets of government social provision seem to have followed a similar pattern: the 1994 National Election Studies survey indicated a favorability rating of 79 percent for “poor people,” compared to just 38 percent for “people on welfare.” The latter result represented an 11-percentage point drop from the same survey in 1974 (Weaver et al. 1995: 612).

<sup>48</sup> As Sotirovic (2001: 752) put it in a study on the effects of welfare coverage in different news formats, “vivid, distinctive, and familiar media information and images may impose themselves in the mind of the audience and begin to serve as a point of reference. Once activated, this information and these images guide further processing and recall and may produce systematic distortions in perceptions.”

might inform mass opinion is typically very low among the American public (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997); in particular, surveys have long indicated that respondents greatly overestimate the amount of federal money spent on means-tested social programs in general, and on welfare specifically (Kuklinski et al. 2000; Sotirovic 2001; Weaver 2002: 109). These dynamics of misinformation have likely added to unfavorable associations in popular common sense to generate negative reactions to public assistance.<sup>49</sup>

Second, while most polls conducted around the time of the 1995-1996 welfare reform debate show strong support for New Right-New Democrat proposals, surveys also indicate that the American public largely supported some progressive policy approaches to changing AFDC. This is most clearly seen in high levels of favorability toward the idea of providing government-guaranteed employment to welfare recipients unable to find private-sector work: for example, in three *CBS News/New York Times* polls conducted in 1994 and 1995, 59 percent to 61 percent of respondents indicated that they would be willing to “pay more in taxes in order to provide job training and public service jobs for people on welfare.” (Weaver et al. 1995: 620) These results are particularly remarkable in light of the clear evidence I present in this chapter that discourse regarding the availability or quality of jobs for former AFDC recipients was exceedingly infrequent in mass media coverage. In this

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<sup>49</sup> Thus, as I noted in Chapter 4’s analysis of the 1981 Reagan economic program, not only news coverage, but the discourse of poll questions themselves can operate as a hegemonic influence on public attitudes. Some surveys fielded by commercial firms and media outlets during the welfare reform debate likely primed public opinion against AFDC by forging negative associations beyond the well-documented influence of the word “welfare.” For example, a January 1995 ABC News-Washington Post poll asked respondents, “in order for the federal government to cut spending to reduce the budget deficit, would you support or oppose reducing welfare, or public assistance, for poor people?” Besides simply prompting respondents to consider the welfare issue in light of the deficit, questions like these also probably operated to cultivate associations in popular common sense between AFDC and government debt. Over time, psychological research suggests, discourse like this can make it more likely that such connections become “chronically accessible,” and thus likely to be brought to bear when people answer poll questions and otherwise express political opinions. Thus, in neo-Gramscian terms, these questions aid the process of forging *articulations* (i.e. linkages among elements of discourse, social identities, material conditions and public policies) that legitimate dominant power relations. Of course, cash welfare spending has never exceeded 1 percent of the federal budget (and the state portion of program spending has generally hovered around 1 percent of state revenues), so the idea that cutting it could have any appreciable effect on deficits is dubious. Remarkably, reported support for reducing welfare in response to this question doubled from just 27 percent in November 1988 to 54 percent on the eve of the Contract with America Congress in 1995 (Weaver et al. 1995: 620). On the wording of surveys and their presentation in news outlets as hegemonic mechanisms, see Lewis (2001).

instance, it appears that other influences on public opinion (such as more direct experiences and egalitarian value orientations cultivated by socialization processes) were sufficiently potent to mute or neutralize the effects of hegemonic mass media discourse during the welfare reform debate. Of course, guaranteed public jobs were not part of the 1996 law that the president signed.

Most importantly, news coverage has been shown to play a significant role in shaping poll results on welfare (e.g. Sotirovic 2001), particularly through the mechanism of racial perceptions (Gilens 1999; Gilliam 1999). Gilens (1999) has demonstrated persuasively that the increasing racialization of mainstream media discourse regarding the poor beginning in the mid-1960s dampened reported public support for “welfare” programs. His study offers strong evidence — and other research, including my own, can be extrapolated to suggest — that news coverage (and the institutional elite rhetoric it largely circulates) bears significant responsibility for increasingly negative public attitudes toward welfare as neoliberalization proceeded and the New Right gathered political momentum. Such coverage over the long term may have played a powerful role in shaping a relatively favorable climate of mass opinion for conservative changes before the debate that resulted in PRWORA began in earnest.<sup>50</sup>

My evidence of the remarkable rightward tilt of mainstream news discourse on welfare reform in 1995 and 1996 — as well as the limited coverage of public policy substance in general — is consistent with the idea that polling results like those I report above were in large part a product of this climate of hegemonic public discourse. In Chapter 8, I use an experiment to demonstrate empirically that the patterns of media coverage I

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<sup>50</sup> Consistent with this explanation, polls show substantial increases from the 1970s and 1980s through the mid-1990s in public support for the ideas that the welfare system is not effective, that welfare discourages work, that lack of individual effort is the primary reason people are poor, that government should do more to help needy people and that too much is spent on welfare (Weaver et al. 1995).

document in my case studies can play a significant causal role in shaping survey results in the ways that I suggest — and, crucially, that different kinds of news discourse (featuring a wider variety of sources, a greater diversity of policy perspectives and more substantive content) can cultivate very different expressions of public opinion than has been the norm for U.S. commercial and academic surveys across the neoliberal era. For now, I identify a few patterns in public opinion during the mid-1990s that strongly suggest that the hegemonic texture of media coverage bore substantial responsibility for generating signals of popular consent during the attack on AFDC and associated federal programs for the poor.

Public support for requiring low-income mothers of very young children to work outside the home increased substantially in 1994 and 1995 (Weaver et al. 1995: 608-9), just as neoliberal-paternalist rhetoric took center stage in mainstream news coverage. Moreover, reported support for explanations of poverty based on individual effort increased by 12 percentage points from November 1993 through April 1995 (ibid: 615); support for cutting the amount of money provided to all people on welfare increased by 14 points from May 1992 through September 1995 (ibid: 626); and agreement with the notion that too much is spent on welfare increased by 11 percentage points from November 1993 through April 1995 (ibid: 619). Similar trends in these and other relevant poll questions are apparent in data spanning 1992 through 1994, which predates the period of my systematic media content analyses; however, it is highly plausible — given the structure of New Democrat arguments on welfare reform during Clinton’s presidential run and his first two years in the White House, and given the high-profile national congressional campaign mounted by the GOP — that patterns of hegemonic news coverage during the period that were very similar to those I demonstrate above played an important role in shaping such survey responses.

Jacobs and Shapiro (2000: 278-83) cite welfare reform as a rare contemporary case in which political elites (specifically the Clinton administration) responded to public opinion, instead of using poll-crafted rhetoric in attempts to shape it. Like Wilentz (2008), however, these authors overstate the differences between the GOP and the White House on the issue. Moreover, while they offer a valuable account of how certain aspects of news coverage relate to elite attempts to shape public opinion, Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) do not carefully analyze the substantive messages on welfare that media propagated in the 1990s and so — oddly, from their study’s broad analytic perspective — their discussion tends to reify poll results on the issue. This treatment of public attitudes on welfare reform also points to the need to integrate analyses of broad structural and substantive shifts — such as how the national Democratic Party has ideologically adapted to the neoliberal-New Right policy hegemony — into focused studies of political communication and opinion-shaping. I return to these matters in Chapter 9.

Accounts of framing and priming effects on mass opinion are often presented in a context that assumes intense and vocal partisan and ideological contestation: the expected condition of pluralistic American politics is that major governing elites, interest group and social movement actors, policy experts and others engage in heated “competition” to have their favored interpretations of issues prevail in public thinking (e.g. Chong and Druckman 2007a, 2007b). So long as citizens have this choice of multifarious and distinctive arguments, so the reasoning goes, democratic opinion formation processes are working well. But such a picture carries a number of questionable assumptions, not least of which are that it seems to take for granted that: 1) the two major parties (along with the innumerable and aggressive interest groups and social movements that thrive under conditions of formally free speech and association) will take strongly divergent positions on important policy issues, and 2) the

channels of political communication will more or less “accurately” reflect these partisan differences, as well as widen the ideological debate further by presenting voices from outside government. But empirical research that systematically evaluates these assumptions is rare.

My analyses in Chapters 5 and 7 indicate that the first assumption — that of strong policy contestation among major partisan elites and powerful interest groups — is questionable. And evidence from the relatively detailed and comprehensive analysis of the discourse that actually appeared in news venues during two historic policy episodes that shaped material conditions and life chances for millions of people casts serious doubt on the second assumption. During the welfare reform debate, the texture of mass media discourse — including the communications frames circulated by major partisan elites, whom audiences typically view as the most credible sources — indicates that large-scale and sustained priming of public opinion occurred only in the direction of benefit cutbacks and restrictions, punitive sanctions, and the exposure of poor mothers and their children to the discipline of neoliberalizing low-wage labor markets. Under these conditions of hegemonic public communication — given what we know conceptually about how discourse interacts with psychological mechanisms, and materially and culturally rooted predispositions, to shape policy opinion — it is difficult to imagine how poll results could have looked much different than they did.

As I elaborate in the next chapter, despite these ideological patterns of public communication, media discourse constructed debate on welfare reform — and enactment of the policy itself — as *fundamentally democratic*: news coverage was nearly evenly balanced along partisan lines, and the frequently bitter language of battle suggested that these institutional political actors disagreed vehemently. In addition, New Right and New Democrat elites were depicted as executing the transparent popular will as expressed through polls like those I cite



above and through the 1994 election results. Even most welfare recipients themselves (whose opinions generally were relayed to news audiences by political elites) were shown to agree with the new regime. However, this democratic patina obscured contrary dynamics that served the emerging neoliberal-New Right hegemony: as I demonstrate in Section III, policy content (including the shape of substantive differences between the Republican Congress and the Clinton administration) was marginalized, thus disconnecting welfare reform from concrete dimensions of social and economic life. Ordinary citizens and nongovernmental groups rarely enjoyed a news platform. And the overall ideological field of media coverage — founded on underlying assumptions about the evils of welfare and manifested in a disproportionate share of messages favoring the new market-oriented regime — tilted sharply toward the right.

Commentators have noted the conservative cast of public debate on welfare reform, but many have viewed this situation as an untroubling instance of a policy that was nearly universally — and correctly — agreed to be failing.<sup>51</sup> As Haskins (2006: 15) wrote, “when the moment of truth arrived in 1995, AFDC had few defenders.” This was because, the rest of his account makes clear, the program was indefensible. Haskins later refers to Mickey Kaus’s widely cited *New Republic* essay on ending welfare — and the endorsement of conservative approaches by a magazine that he termed the “leading intellectual and cultural journal of the left for most of the century” — as evidence for significant trans-ideological support for reform (ibid: 16). In the next chapter, I offer evidence from qualitative textual analyses to contest and complicate this interpretation. For now, Haskins’ perspective is

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<sup>51</sup> The notion that there was a near-elite/popular consensus that welfare reform should proceed along the lines favored by neoliberal New Right-New Democrat forces seems to have been deeply ingrained in common sense even among mainstream intellectuals and policy analysts. In an explicitly non-partisan forum that emphasizes relatively dispassionate data and argument over high-flown rhetoric, a *Congressional Quarterly* report declared (without citing survey evidence) that “now *most observers think* it’s time to overhaul the \$25 billion program....there is a *growing feeling among most Americans* that welfare recipients should be weaned from benefits and into jobs.” (Kellam 1994: 1; emphasis added)

worth pointing out as an illustration of the extent to which progressive opposition to the attacks on AFDC — to say nothing of potentially counter-hegemonic articulations regarding the politics of socioeconomic policy — were effectively suppressed and muted in public discourse by the 1990s.<sup>52</sup>

Weaver (2002: 116) understated the case considerably when he wrote that cash welfare “was almost devoid of powerful and vocal defenders within government.” But such characterizations beg the question of what it means in the context of contemporary mass communications for a policy to have “powerful and vocal defenders” (or critics) who might plausibly play a part in shaping public opinion. Again, the media’s role as an arbiter of ideological hegemony is central here: while by this time the neoliberal consensus had developed to a point where some forces on the institutional political left in the United States had considerably scaled back their policy aspirations and adjusted their discourse in response to new conditions, there *were* many critics of the conservative push for welfare reform not only outside, but inside national government. In fact, these opponents made up a substantial share of Democrats in Congress. Half the Democratic caucus in the House of Representatives — and nearly half in the Senate — voted against PRWORA. I have not conducted a systematic analysis of discourse in the Congressional Record, but it is hard to imagine that these elites did not frequently voice their opinions (even if their status as minority partisans afforded them less opportunity to do so in formal legislative arenas). Indeed, Democratic elites who were not part of the Clinton administration were the main voices of opposition to the neoliberalizing welfare regime as debate was presented in mainstream media coverage. However, these sources formed a very small share of content

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<sup>52</sup> In a remarkable demonstration of this marginalization, my analyses indicate that — despite the exceedingly thin empirical evidence on the causal link between welfare receipt and single parenthood — messages challenging (or even questioning) this key New Right-New Democrat argument appeared just three times across 20 months of TV news coverage; such messages did not appear at all in *USA Today* coverage of welfare reform.

on network TV and in *USA Today* during 1995 and 1996, comprising just a little more than 10 percent of total voices (including less than 7 percent of sources on television); in contrast, as I note above, Republican elites were the single-most frequent source in coverage of welfare reform, comprising fully 37 percent of total voices.

While the picture that I paint in this chapter generally mirrors the major communications patterns that emerged from my analysis of the debate over Reagan's 1981 economic plan, this is one instance in which the two cases seem to diverge. In the earlier case, while congressional Democratic opposition to the New Right economic agenda was dominated by conservative arguments in favor of this policy, such opposition was more prominent than it would become in mainstream media treatment of welfare reform: 1981, left-leaning policy messages (almost all of which came from Democrats in Congress) made up 17 percent of total source-frames in network TV and Associated Press coverage. During the welfare reform episode, such frames comprised just 12.5 percent of total messages. Moreover, as I note above, Clinton administration voices (which, although they were mostly favorable, exhibited some contestation over and ambivalence about conservative welfare reform) were much less prominent in news coverage than was the case for Reagan administration sources during debate over the 1981 economic plan.<sup>53</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, I coded just 11.4 percent of welfare stories as generally “unfavorable” toward the neoliberal-paternalist reform agenda (including a mere 1.8 percent — or two news reports across 20 months of coverage — that were “very unfavorable”), compared to 63.1 percent that were favorable toward the policy proposals. During the 1981 debate, while only 12.7 percent of total stories were either “very” or “somewhat

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<sup>53</sup> Clinton administration voices comprised 36.7 percent of total welfare sources on TV and just 24.5 percent in print, while Reagan administration sources made up fully 52.6 percent of total television voices during the 1981 policy episode, and 43.9 percent of sources in Associated Press coverage of that issue

unfavorable,” 3.2 percent fell into the former category, and a substantially smaller share of reports (49.7 percent) was favorable toward the Reaganite tax and budget plans. To the extent that audiences form provisional “bottom line” evaluations of issues based on the total framing, priming and policy learning effects from each news report they encounter, the balance of any series of such judgments that they constructed during the welfare reform episode was significantly more weighted in the conservative direction (one unfavorable story for every 5.5 favorable reports) than would have been the case during debate over the 1981 economic plan (one unfavorable news report for every 3.9 favorable reports).

Finally, the overall volume of mass media coverage was much higher during the 1981 case than during the welfare reform episode: regular television news viewers might encounter a story on the Reagan economic plan roughly four to five times a week (145 reports over 7.5 months); during the latter debate, such viewers might watch a report on welfare reform just once every 11 days. These stark differences in coverage volume are unexpected, but they are consistent with the thesis that, with the rise in entertainment values and so-called “lifestyle news,” mainstream media across the neoliberal era has become less focused on substantive political and public policy issues (Bennett 2009 [1983]: 238-42). From the standpoint of the democratic character of public opinion expression, these conditions suggest not only that news audiences during the welfare reform case were generally less likely to encounter relevant substantive communications, broadly defined (i.e. stories that at all touched on the issue), but also that their opportunities for engaging with political discourse with which they might build dissenting opinions toward the neoliberal-New Right policy trend were significantly more limited: a smaller volume of coverage makes it much less likely that someone tuning in at any particular point in the policy debate will encounter oppositional messages.

These differences in mass media coverage between the 1981 economic plan episode and the welfare reform debate are consistent with an explanation grounded in the effects of the neoliberal turn on both political elites and on news operations, and they raise major questions about the democratic texture of public opinion formation during a crucial historical period. As the march of neoliberalization proceeded, the center of gravity for economic and social welfare policy in the national Democratic Party shifted to the right (as evidenced in the capture of the party apparatus by the Clintonite-New Democrat bloc). This made it less likely that partisan officials would stake out sharply divergent positions on these issues, thus narrowing the substantive range of institutional elite debate. At the same time, media itself adapted to the emerging conservative hegemony both by following the lead of this more limited landscape of partisan policy contestation, and by muting the remaining elite left-of-center voices (such as congressional Democrats who opposed neoliberal-paternalist welfare reform). News outlets (increasingly organized into giant conglomerates that cross industries) also offered less coverage of key domestic policy debates; feeling intense competitive pressures to draw audiences, media responded by focusing less on “hard” political news in general — and even less on issues like welfare, which are thought not to appeal to the affluent consumer base that drives ratings and advertising revenue (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004). This suggests that not only has the Democratic Party — and the state apparatus in general — undergone tremendous changes over the last 30 or so years, but that the mainstream media itself has adjusted to the political-economic influence of the new conservative hegemony.

But which features of the welfare reform messages propagated by conservative forces — and magnified so profoundly by mass media — might have made appeals for welfare cutbacks, work requirements and similar policy approaches into a potent influence

on public opinion? How did these forces articulate particular fragments of discourse with citizens' material experiences and social understandings as embedded in popular common sense to construct coherent narratives that would support the neoliberal-New Right agenda? In Chapter 7, I engage these questions through a critical semiotic analysis of key political texts in the welfare reform debate, tracing the internal relations of the frames that New Right-New Democrat actors propagated and embedding their meanings in the broader context of neoliberalizing America during the 1980s and 1990s.

My arguments regarding the substance of neoliberal policy discourse in this case extend and adapt those I presented for the 1981 tax and budget episode. Most centrally, conservative forces effectively articulated the core opposition between the oppressive liberal state and the dynamic free market to apply to welfare in particular (racially coded and gendered) ways. This move simultaneously enforced the discursive separation of politics and economics, and concealed the intricate practical connections between government and market that the neoliberal project has entailed.

My evidence on the major topics of mass media coverage offers a window into these ideological operations: as noted above, stories that focused mainly on the macroeconomic implications of the welfare policy debate were exceedingly infrequent. Discussion of the need for government action to increase the quantity and improve the quality of jobs that former welfare recipients would take made up a tiny portion of news discourse, and there was no talk about the wages that "workfare" recipients would receive under the new regime.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, even as the concrete design and implementation of PRWORA intensified government monitoring, control and coercion of poor people, the elite rhetoric

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<sup>54</sup> As Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]: 397) write, "by the 1990s, the work-enforcing theme in anti-welfare rhetoric had become grandiose...By these accounts, rising unemployment, declining wage levels, and disappearing fringe benefits need not have concerned anyone."

and news discourse surrounding it overwhelmingly represented the move as a *withdrawal* of the distorting state from the natural private economic sphere. Thus, debate over the 1981 Reagan economic program generally represented the domestic state — through its onerous schemes of taxation and redistribution — as the oppressor of a classless majority of productive private market actors. During the welfare reform episode, the state was typically depicted as an enabler of non-productive social parasites and cultural deviants. In both cases, however, public discourse effectively muted or concealed the neoliberal state's role as an apparatus of control for privileged market interests — and thus, the potential disclosure of the thoroughly power-laden character of forces that *traverse* government and economy.

As in the earlier case, oppositional and potentially counter-hegemonic voices and perspectives on welfare were available in public discourse. But, as I demonstrate in this chapter and the next, these popular forces — led by aid recipients allied with sectors of the organized labor movement and progressive intellectuals — were effectively marginalized or ignored by a mainstream media complex that by 1995 and 1996 was deeply ensconced in the neoliberal hegemony. This suggests that the level of mass consent for welfare reform as expressed in opinion polls — often depicted as an exogenous, nearly uniform democratic force in favor of the new policy regime — *could* have been different, had the landscape of political discourse and the news media coverage that circulates it been different.

## Chapter 7 -- Stopping “America’s Descent Into the Welfare Abyss:” Hegemonic Policy Discourse and the End of AFDC

### I. Introduction: Charting the Spread of Hegemonic Discourse

As my analysis in the last chapter showed, mainstream media coverage during the 1995-1996 welfare reform episode closely followed the patterns established during debate over the 1981 Reagan economic program: network TV stories and *USA Today* news reports again highlighted an elite-focused spectacle of strategy and tactics, normalizing a top-down vision of politics that symbolically demobilized and silenced popular constituencies, especially welfare recipients themselves (Debord 2010 [1967]; Edelman 1988). When mass media discourse touched on the substantive shape and implications of welfare policy, neoliberal-New Right voices and messages significantly outnumbered alternative actors and frames, while government sources were dominant across the 20-month period of analysis. This evidence constitutes a further illustration of neo-Gramscian conceptualizations of *negative ideology*: the discourse on welfare reform that was plausibly available to most Americans through news media was dominated almost completely by official voices, and largely avoided addressing the socioeconomic effects and historical or social context of the issue. At the same time, the substantive coverage that media did present narrowly favored right-of-center sources and perspectives, including a Clinton administration mainly concerned with making welfare stingier and more punitive, and scaling back federal social programs more broadly. Once again, despite public opinion polls showing strong backing for the reform initiative, there is solid evidence to suggest that the hegemonic mass media operated to shape this consent and channel it in ways that legitimated the New Right-New



Democrat anti-welfare consensus and the broader neoliberal political economy that it supported.

In this chapter, I deconstruct the cultural associations that suffused political discourse on welfare reform using the method of critical semiotics. As in my analysis in Chapter 5 of the Reagan tax and budget episode, I place the messages circulated through media coverage in historical and cultural context, and discuss the currents of popular common sense that political actors drew on to legitimate their policy stances and the broader power relations that underlay them. These qualitative analyses illustrate more clearly the concept of *positive ideology* — i.e. how news texts (and the voices that speak through them) present visions of society, politics and policy in words and pictures that shape the expressions of popular sentiment that appear in the waves of commercial, news and non-profit opinion polls that engulf contemporary American political culture.

I offer interpretations of several emblematic texts in the debate that led to the Personality Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA): for New Right discourse, I rely on the Republican Contract With America and assorted essays, editorials and policy briefs published by the Hoover Institution and the Heritage Foundation; for New Democrat interpretations, I focus on key speeches and statements by President Clinton; and for potentially counter-hegemonic discourse outside the neoliberal framework, I analyze contemporary artifacts from the left-alternative press on the grassroots welfare-rights movement, along with some magazine essays and policy briefs written by progressive intellectuals.<sup>1</sup> I also examine TV and *USA Today* reports to focus more directly on mass media's role in refracting, magnifying or marginalizing the discourse of these

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<sup>1</sup> Like the Heritage Foundation, the Hoover Institution (based at Stanford University) is a key neoliberal-New Right think tank that received major injections of corporate and right-wing foundation money beginning in the 1970s (O'Connor 2008). Its mission statement asserts that "both our social and economic systems are based on **private enterprise** from which springs initiative and ingenuity." (emphasis in original)

political actors, and in constructing a general democratic consensus for neoliberal welfare reform.<sup>2</sup>

Table 7-1 summarizes four key themes of elite and media discourse that I identify as operating to support the right turn in U.S. welfare policy that accelerated during the mid-1990s:

- 1) A radical separation of state and economy that, by representing the poor as “non-workers,” obscured the deeply rooted connections between social provision and low-wage capitalist labor markets, thus supporting neoliberal business power.
- 2) A set of gendered and racialized representations of public aid recipients and low-income people as moral deviants that served to signify African Americans and single mothers as especially deprived and in need of market discipline, thus legitimating government restrictions on their autonomy and dividing popular constituencies.
- 3) A generalized construction of mass consensus that was achieved through media’s focus on ordinary Americans (including individual aid recipients) as principled supporters of reform and its marginalization of organized popular protest, which served to democratically legitimate neoliberal welfare policy.
- 4) A generalized depiction of official partisan conflict that — through its focus on the spectacle of political strategy and tactics at the expense of policy substance — masked the elite neoliberal consensus and implicitly constructed popular constituencies as peripheral to debate over welfare.

<sup>2</sup> Links to some of the cultural artifacts I analyze in this chapter are reproduced in the Appendix. For those from which I excerpt smaller portions, please see the in-chapter citations.

As in the 1981 episode, my evidence shows that oppositional social visions and policy views — including those that went beyond the orthodox Democratic Party messages of New Deal-Great Society liberalism — were available in public discourse: welfare recipients and their allies collectively mobilized against the neoliberal regime by presenting alternative significations of the linkages between the state apparatus and the capitalist economy. Moreover, these potentially counter-hegemonic articulations communicated a vision of multi-racial popular social agency and grassroots political action that challenged both the apparent consensus in favor of welfare austerity and the privileges of elitist policymaking. However, as I showed in Chapter 6, mass media audiences had virtually no access to fully articulated messages strongly critical of neoliberal welfare reform.

## **II. Visions of State and Market: “Welfare-to-Work” and Labor Discipline**

As I explored at length through semiotic analyses of the Reagan economic plan debate in Chapter 5, the New Right has advanced policy claims in support of neoliberalism by constructing the state as an enemy of hard-working ordinary Americans who — in their role as patriotic “producers” — suffer economic and cultural oppression at the hands of liberal elites. This basic set of significations, which has suffused the conservative-populist discourse of Republican leaders and their allies throughout the era, has been particularly effective in supporting regressive reconfigurations of the tax code, beginning with the 1981 plan and continuing most notably in 2001 and 2003. We see similar rhetoric advocating cuts in social and business regulatory spending become more prominent as media attention turned directly to a core component of the welfare state in 1995 and 1996: conservatives presented an overbearing liberal government apparatus as demanding obscene shares of legitimately earned private market income and wealth to support its deviant and unproductive clients (social program beneficiaries, federal bureaucrats and allies in the

nonprofit, academic and media sectors). This discourse signifies the (artificial) state and the (natural, apolitical) market as inherently opposed spheres of social life, the former (and its clients) parasitic on the latter.

During the welfare reform debate, this discursive separation of state and market took a specific form that depicts social provision (and public aid recipients) as inherently opposed to economic “production” (and workers). This is signified most clearly in the ubiquitous rhetorical device of “welfare-to-work,” which operated ideologically (in the positive register) to construct private market actors (“workers”) as socially and culturally normative, and (in the negative ideological dimension) to obscure the historic and contemporary structural connections between state social programs and low-wage labor markets. These significations (which were propagated, with some differences of emphasis and degree, by both New Right and New Democrat actors) helped to solidify and strengthen the power of business corporations to discipline workers, and to defuse and hold off political challenges to neoliberalism by dividing people (in racially and sexually charged ways) into antagonistic constituencies.

#### **A. “Welfare-to-Work” as Ideology and Political Project**

Under the neoliberal consensus that enfolded both New Right and New Democrat political-economic discourse, the national state constitutes an illegitimate check on the primordial energies that animate private markets. In the speeches, policy documents and other texts whose discourse fueled mainstream news coverage of welfare reform in 1995 and 1996, aid recipients are consistently positioned as “not-workers” who must be simultaneously denigrated and uplifted in a transition from government “dependency” to “self-sufficiency” as market laborers. Thus, the liberal state (through its taxes and business regulations) is not only a social and economic oppressor of ordinary American producers

(often condensed in the signifier “taxpayers), it is an oppressor of poor (and minority) women (and children) who are denied the material prosperity and spiritual joys entailed by market citizenship. In this bipartisan discourse, “welfare” and “work” are constructed as existential opposites with divergent cultural connotations and material implications: the overriding goal of neoliberal reform is to “move” recipients “from” welfare “to” work.

New Right-New Democrat public statements were suffused with depictions of AFDC recipients as not willing to “work.”<sup>3</sup> As I discuss in Section III, these representations carried a number of politically crucial racialized and gendered inflections, but the overriding focus was to legitimate the delivery of welfare recipients to the neoliberalizing labor market on terms that were favorable to business. This dimension of the conservative hegemonic project entailed a severe individualization of the sources of poverty in personal failure and cultural pathology (often, as I discuss in Section III-B, signified with strong religious overtones), and, by extension, a political division of Americans suffering under neoliberalization into constituencies whose interests and values were constructed as antagonistic.

For instance, the Contract With America pledged to institute “*work requirements to promote individual responsibility*,” and the GOP’s “Personal Responsibility Act” (which was the blueprint for the 1996 legislation) sought to “reduce government *dependency*” and “*require* welfare recipients to enter *work* programs.”<sup>4</sup> Welfare recipients “should *have to work* for their benefits,” the Heritage Foundation’s Robert Rector wrote in 1995.<sup>5</sup> Gingrich told Heritage financiers just after the 1994 electoral victory that “there is an enormous moral burden on

<sup>3</sup> Even the name given to the post-1996 welfare system — “*Temporary Assistance for Needy Families*” — signified pre-reform aid recipients as perpetually and pathologically dependent.

<sup>4</sup> The full text of the contract and the ten bills the GOP Congress proposed in 1995 are available here: <http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.html>. Unless otherwise indicated in this chapter, I — not the author — am responsible for italicizing portions of textual quotes to emphasize key ideological signifiers.

<sup>5</sup> “How To Reform Welfare.” (August 1, 1995) I obtained all Heritage Foundation texts cited in this chapter from the organization’s online archives.

those who would keep the poor *trapped in public systems* that are destroying them. The burden of *destroying the poor* is on the left. It is the left which *traps the poor in public housing projects* where *no one goes to work.*<sup>6</sup> California Gov. Pete Wilson told another Heritage audience in 1995, “if we make these changes, we’ll *free* millions of Americans from the *chains of dependency* that *stifle opportunity.*”<sup>7</sup>

“Work” — signifying labor performed for private-sector, profit-seeking businesses — is thus constructed in stark opposition to “welfare,” which connotes unearned benefits that (like the liberal state itself) exploit the economic initiative of others. In this way, neoliberal-New Right voices cultivated the notion that one either “works” (i.e. she produces economic and social value in the private market) or is “on welfare” (she enjoys a life of leisure fueled by government checks). These articulations activate a host of associations in popular common sense that resonate with the “producerist” narrative (Berlet and Lyons 2000) that I discuss in Chapters 2 and 5: private-sector employees and entrepreneurs are tough, disciplined, enterprising, responsible and capable of maximizing their families’ well-being (and, thus, that of the nation itself) through judicious market choices. Social benefits recipients, on the other hand, are weak, undisciplined, lazy and irresponsible; indeed (as I explore in more detail in Section III) they are morally corrupt because they have no qualms indulging their hedonism with others’ material resources. As Gingrich asked incredulously in a January 12, 1995, segment of *ABC World News Tonight*, “I mean, what is this mindset that says *we owe you cash?*” Thus, wage employment and business activity is both enabled by and begets the personal and cultural qualities that garner social esteem in America, while welfare

<sup>6</sup> “What Elections Mean to Conservatives.” (November 15, 1994)

<sup>7</sup> “Kicking America’s *Welfare Habit: Politics, Illegitimacy and Personal Responsibility.*” (September 6, 1995)

Similarly, the Heritage Foundation’s Robert Rector claims that “*welfare* operates as a form of *social toxin*. The more of this toxin received by a child’s family, the less successful will be the child as an adult... *Welfare* operates as a system of *organized, well-funded child abuse.*” Thus, aid is signified as a systematically delivered and expensively concocted poison that shatters innocence (“Why Congress Must Reform Welfare.” December 4, 1995).

is a perversion of the individualized “work ethic” and spurs a host of behavioral and social pathologies: as Haskins (2006: 28), a key GOP congressional aide on welfare reform, put it bluntly, “these are the *rules*, and everyone’s decisions are *disciplined* by the *natural* forces of the *market*, including destitution for *individuals* who *fail*.”

These articulations signify that failure to “work” — and, thus (under the “natural” conditions of pure market competition), material poverty itself — is mostly a personal choice: economic opportunity abounds for any American who is simply willing to seize it.<sup>8</sup> As Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole pontificated in a September 19, 1995, segment of *NBC Nightly News*, policymakers were ushering in “an America where *welfare will no longer be a way of life*, and where people will no longer be able to receive *endless* federal cash benefits, *just because they choose not to work*.” A quote from a patron at a North Carolina barbeque joint, which was aired in an *ABC: Nightline* special report broadcast the evening that Clinton announced he would sign the welfare bill, captures this sentiment: “They ought to put a time limit on it, say a six-month time limit, and if you can’t find a job in six months, that just *proves* you *don’t want to work*,” an unidentified white man told viewers. One of the “three rules” for avoiding poverty promulgated by the Heritage Foundation’s Robert Rector is “get a job — *any job* — and *stick with it*.”<sup>9</sup> Ultimately, it seems, all that is necessary for prosperity are wholesome personal habits, determination, energy — and, perhaps, training or education programs sufficient for minimum-wage employment.

Moreover, the personal attitudes and practices needed to survive and thrive in the private labor market are also the key lessons to pass on to one’s children: Governor Wilson told of a welfare reform “success story” who took an “entry-level job at a small wireless

<sup>8</sup> Haskins (2006) wrote that the pre-1996 welfare system — under which “young people were *lured* into a *life of dependency*” (ibid: 29) — resulted in single women “*refusing* to work.” (ibid: 28)

<sup>9</sup> “How to Reform Welfare.” (August 1, 1995) Rector’s other two rules are to obtain a high school education and not have children outside of marriage.

cable company,” was promoted three times and became “assistant to the head of the company.” “She *just needed* the skills and *discipline to take a job and stick with it*,” the governor assured his Heritage Foundation audience. “Most important, the job isn’t just helping her, it’s helping her children. They now have the example of a mother who *gets up every morning and goes to work*, teaching them what it means to accept *responsibility for yourself and contribute to your community*.”<sup>10</sup> These articulations suggest that single mothers (who comprised the vast majority of AFDC recipients) neither “work,” nor even *want* to work: (until prodded by the state), Wilson’s former welfare client not only lacked “discipline” and “responsibility” for “herself” — and failed to “work” — she neither “contributed” to her “community,” nor, even, “got up every morning.” Asked about the challenges confronting welfare recipients in the job market, Joanna Thompson of the Wake County (NC) Economic Development Commission told *Nightline*, “they’ve got to be *motivated*, they’ve got to really *want* to go get that job, and they’ve got to know that there’s a new company coming to town with 100 jobs, but there are going to be probably 1,000 people applying for those jobs.” Again, the key to economic success is to be “motivated,” to “want” success and to compete with other individual strivers.

This discourse operates to mystify several dimensions of the well-documented concrete experience of welfare recipients (before and after the 1996 law). As I note in Chapter 6, long-term receipt of public assistance has never been the norm in America: families typically cycle into and out of benefit programs according to broad economic trends, the brutal rhythms of the low-wage labor market, and the random onset of illness, automobile breakdowns and other personal challenges (Cooper 1995; Piven and Cloward

<sup>10</sup> Similarly, California Department of Social Services Director Eloise Anderson argued that “the aim of welfare reform is to make life better for children. Right now, AFDC children are *left out of the mainstream* because their parents are *not required to work*. They see their parents being *unproductive* and getting food, clothing, and shelter *without having to work*. Children become so *unfamiliar with work* that they *lack the skills and discipline* they need to succeed in a job.” (Anderson 1996)



1993 [1971]). The cultural figure of the lifetime welfare recipient is a myth, in Roland Barthes' sense of a systematically distorted and partial rendering of concrete history that serves the interests of power. Moreover, before the 1996 policy change welfare recipients in many states could work part-time for wages and still be entitled to benefits — and many did. Welfare mothers also frequently work “under the table” to supplement their incomes in order to avoid losing eligibility (Stone 2007). Recipients “work” in such ways because it is virtually impossible to survive — let alone to live in reasonable comfort and security — on means-tested social benefits alone. And of course, as I explore in more depth in the Section III-B, even welfare mothers who do not “work” (formally or informally) in private markets certainly work to care for their families, usually under incredibly difficult conditions.

Still, neoliberal-New Right voices consistently signified that the normal condition of pre-reform public assistance recipients was either mindless leisure or simple inactivity: the GOP's Personal Responsibility Act “required that aid be cut off if recipients *did not work*,” Heritage's Jeffrey B. Gayner told a conservative think tank in Athens, Greece, in 1995.<sup>11</sup> Welfare recipients “should *have to work* for their benefits,” Rector wrote.<sup>12</sup> In a roundtable of state welfare administrators, Vince McMahan, policy director for then-Texas Governor George W. Bush, pledged that his boss was “committed to marshaling all necessary resources to *liberate as many people as possible from dependence on government*.” Asked if PRWORA would hurt children and families, California Department of Social Services Director Eloise Anderson suggested that the liberal state itself was harming the poor by short-circuiting their

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey B. Gayner. “The Contract With America: Implementing New Ideas in the U.S.” (October 12, 1995). The event was sponsored by the Centre for Political Research and Information, described as “a privately supported research institution that supports individualism and the free-market economy.” The conference's title, “Beyond Statism: New Ideas,” demonstrates clearly the neoliberal-New Right's signification of its political-economic agenda as an attack on dated notions and practices of governmental regimentation.

<sup>12</sup> “How to Reform Welfare.” (August 1, 1995).

natural reactions to market stimuli: they “will do what it takes to survive. Once *government gets out of their way*, welfare recipients will *respond accordingly*.” (Anderson 1996)

Despite news media’s frequent construction of these forces as fierce political opponents (which I explore in Section IV-B below), New Democrat voices largely echoed this New Right focus on the individual and cultural (rather than social and political-economic) roots of poverty, consistently activating fragments of common sense that construct recipients were non-workers. In his 1994 State of the Union address, Clinton promised that his welfare reform proposal would “restore the *basic values of work and responsibility*.”<sup>13</sup> A year later, he proclaimed that the current system “rewards *welfare over work*” and noted his administration’s approval of regulatory waivers for state-level policies that aimed “to promote *work and responsibility over welfare and dependency*.”<sup>14</sup> “There ought to be a *simple, hard rule*,” the president continued. “Anyone who can work *must go to work*... Our goal must be to *liberate* people and *lift* them from *dependence to independence*, from *welfare to work*.”<sup>15</sup>

Clinton and his allies also continually reinforced New Right representations of public assistance recipients as “trapped” in a system that saps their individual moral capacities and their natural sense of economic initiative.<sup>16</sup> As the president said at the signing ceremony for the bill, covered live by CNN on August 22, 1996: “*We all know* there are a lot of *good people* on welfare who just get off of it in the ordinary course of *business*, but that a significant

<sup>13</sup> Clinton’s speeches are archived at: [http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/renka/modern\\_presidents/clinton\\_speeches.htm](http://cstl-cla.semo.edu/renka/modern_presidents/clinton_speeches.htm).

<sup>14</sup> In a prime-time press conference broadcast live by CNN on April 18, 1995, the president activated powerful cultural associations by demanding that Congress send him a welfare reform bill by July 4, “so that we can celebrate Independence Day by giving Americans on welfare the chance, the opportunity, the *responsibility* to move to *independence*.” Unless otherwise noted, all the televisual texts I reference in this chapter were obtained from the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive.

<sup>15</sup> Later in the speech, Clinton promotes the nostrums of personal initiative and responsibility to “change our tomorrows.” He continued, “and America’s best example of that may be Lynn Woolsey, who worked her way off welfare to become a Congresswoman from the state of California.” The president never tells exactly how Woolsey, a progressive Democrat who would vote against the 1996 law, managed to “work her way off welfare,” but the construction suggests that once Woolsey (as an individual) made the *choice* to begin “working” (for wages in the private marketplace), she was simply able to get “off welfare,” and be on her way to a career in the U.S. Congress.

<sup>16</sup> Compare Clinton’s rhetoric to Gingrich’s construction of the poor as “*trapped in public systems* that are destroying them.” Indeed, the many specific correspondences between the Democratic president’s and the GOP House speaker’s welfare rhetoric belie mass media’s depiction of them as in bitter political conflict.

number of people are *trapped on welfare* for a very long time, *exiling* them from the entire *community of work* that gives *structure* to our lives.” While Clinton diverges from typical New Right formulations in at least acknowledging that many people receive welfare benefits for short periods, as a whole this passage signifies strongly in a cultural code that favors neoliberal reforms. Welfare itself is like a punishment, denying recipients the opportunity to join a group (“community”) defined by its engagement in “work” (i.e. wage labor). Public assistance recipients (whose lives, as I detail in Section III, are disordered) must be delivered to the “structured” existence that only participation in the private market can provide. Moreover, even in a chain of significations that on one level shows sympathy for benefits recipients, in the connotative code individual morality is articulated with personal initiative and private markets: Clinton suggests that it is the “good” people who manage to escape welfare in the course of “business.” This implies that long-term recipients (who, vaguely, make up a “significant number” — “we all know this,” Clinton assures us, reinforcing the common-sense myth of the welfare abuser) are marked by personal failings.

By speaking in this register, the president and his allies exposed to political attack even their own mild revisions to the New Right’s welfare agenda. As I noted in Chapter 6, the administration favored larger expenditures for child care, transportation and other transitional assistance than did the GOP Congress, and even initially proposed some funding to launch public jobs programs for recipients.<sup>17</sup> But the New Democrats’ dominant definitions of material poverty and its degradations as chiefly personal and cultural phenomena — and of individual poor people as faced with a clear choice between the existential opposites “welfare” and “work”— made it virtually impossible for them to effectively articulate specific policies grounded in more systemic explanations, even if they

<sup>17</sup> However, as I also showed in the last chapter, these messages comprised a miniscule proportion of total frames in mainstream media coverage, even among discourse that was attributed to administration sources.

had made a stronger effort to propagate such messages. Clinton's discourse deployed concepts with deep resonances in American popular common sense (poverty as individually determined, through personal failure and cultural pathology), and articulated these with policy tools designed to solve this particular rendering of the "welfare crisis" (stringent time limits, work requirements and coercive therapeutic interventions). By focusing so frequently and intensely on themes related to "personal responsibility" and the need to end "big government," New Democrats primed considerations that defined structurally or institutionally targeted policies off the agenda: if domestic programs are costly, inefficient and stifling — and if people are poor because of personal habits and refusal to work — there is neither practical need nor cultural logic for public investments to create decent employment opportunities.

Clinton even implicitly indicts himself for ensnaring people in the "trap" of government dependency. While some New Right actors later acknowledged that the New Democrats' basic welfare agenda was in line with their own (e.g. Haskins 2006), my survey of media coverage, policy texts and secondary sources indicates that, by and large, conservative forces depicted the administration and the Democratic Party as far to the left on the issue, particularly when they were communicating in forums geared toward the mass public.<sup>18</sup> New Right discourse has long depicted liberal government officials, administrators and "unproductive" public benefits recipients as locked in a perverse symbiosis in which bureaucrats excuse the deviant and shiftless behavior of the "non-working" poor in order to further their own (otherwise unjustifiable) lucrative incomes and careers, and politicians

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<sup>18</sup> For instance, California Governor Wilson claimed that his state was being held hostage to "the whims of *Bill Clinton's welfare bureaucrats*. We are compelled to wrench reform from *hostile guardians of the status quo*," he said. Wilson demanded that Clinton provide "no strings attached" authority to make welfare programs more stringent: "It's what you promised the *American people*. Have the guts to keep your word," he said. "Unfortunately, like a lot of voters, I'm skeptical he will." ("Kicking America's Welfare Habit: Politics, Illegitimacy and Personal Responsibility." September 6, 1995) And in an op-ed piece, the Heritage Foundation's Rector argued that Clinton's policy plan was "liberal" and serves the "interests of *America's huge welfare bureaucracy*." ("Welfare Reform and the Death of Marriage." February 22, 1996)

provide budgetary and policy support in exchange for the campaign contributions and political muscle supplied by these “special interests:” in 1996, the Hoover Institution’s flagship journal devoted several pages to a detailed analysis of how the modern social work profession was likely to “subvert” welfare reform. The anonymous writer fingers “influential lobbying organizations” like the American Public Welfare Association and National Association of Social Workers (NASW), cites as evidence of their formidable “political influence” data showing that 64 percent of these groups’ members report donating money to a political campaign and 33 percent report involvement in lobbying activities, claims that social workers “lean strongly to the left” as evidenced by the NASW executive committee’s endorsement of the Clinton-Gore re-election ticket, and casts suspicion on Democratic members of Congress with Masters of Social Work degrees: “the government welfare industry” (Hoover Institution 1996) is, in the words of Heritage’s Robert Rector, “an industry that thrives on social decay.”<sup>19</sup> During the 1995-1996 debate, the Clinton administration inserted itself into this narrative as villain: no matter how widespread and vehement was the New Democrats’ rhetoric (and the bulk of their concrete policy initiatives) in legitimating (and enforcing) the neoliberal turn, they did not escape attacks from the right for being “soft on the (non-working) poor.”<sup>20</sup>

To be sure, the president sometimes articulated his calls for welfare reform with other aspects of his economic agenda — especially raising the minimum wage, tax cuts for lower- and middle-income people, education funding, deficit reduction and neoliberal global

<sup>19</sup> “Welfare Reform and the Death of Marriage” (February 22, 1996). Not incidentally, the Hoover Institution writer cites approvingly efforts in some states to hold open recruitment seeking especially those with private-sector experience to staff “welfare-to-work” programs, so as to bypass social workers’ ideological bias — and, perhaps, the political power of their professional associations and public employee unions (Hoover Institution 1996). Similarly, Heritage’s Rector rearticulates for right-wing ends a culturally resonant signifier when he dismisses “cries of alarm from the *welfare establishment*.” (“Why Congress Must Reform Welfare.” December 4, 1995) And Don Taylor of the Mississippi Department of Human Services claimed that “federal bureaucrats” wanted the “welfare-to-work” movement to fail (Anderson 1996).

<sup>20</sup> In an op-ed asking “Are Conservatives Winning or Losing?” (April 25, 1996), Heritage President Edwin Feulner asserts the insincerity of Clinton’s death knell for “big government,” writing that “when an opponent is forced to mouth words he doesn’t believe...that is when he has lost the war — at least the rhetorical war — the war of ideas.”

trade arrangements — which he claimed would raise living standards and equalize opportunity.<sup>21</sup> But when talking about welfare specifically, Clinton generally avoided discussion of broader economic conditions. Moreover, at least as far as I can determine from public statements and mainstream media coverage, the president by 1995 and 1996 had virtually dropped his earlier, tepid commitment to federal investment in guaranteed public jobs for former welfare recipients. And Clinton chose not to propose a concerted, nationwide public employment program.

Instead, he promoted the option under the new policy for states and localities to subsidize hiring of former recipients by private businesses, and he urged these companies to employ such workers, rather than advocating policies that would mandate (and fund) public jobs programs, or would use federal taxation and regulatory authority to require businesses to provide employment. In his 1996 State of the Union address, Clinton said, “I *challenge American businesses* to *give* people on welfare the chance to move into the work force.” But this was more a rhetorical “challenge” than a materially effective one: New Democrat discourse assumed the unalloyed power of private markets to allocate economic opportunity on their terms. Announcing his decision to sign PRWORA (covered live by CNN), Clinton said that “the business community *must* provide greater private-sector jobs that people on welfare need to build good lives and strong families.” And shortly after signing the welfare bill, the president told delegates to the Democratic National Convention:

We have a responsibility, we have a *moral obligation* to *make sure* the people who are being required to work have the opportunity to work. We must *make sure* the jobs are there. There *should be* one million new jobs for welfare recipients by the year 2000. States under this law *can* now take the money that was spent on the welfare check and use it to help businesses provide paychecks. I *challenge* every state to do it soon.

<sup>21</sup> Clinton signed a minimum wage hike two days before signing welfare reform in 1996. But even with this increase — which would bring the nominal level to \$5.15 an hour on September 1, 1997 — the real value of the wage was lower than it was in 1978, and much lower than its peak in 1968 (it remains lower today). Full-time, year-round work for one breadwinner at the federal minimum wage has never been sufficient to raise a family of four past the official poverty line (Baker 2007).

Here, the president signifies the creation of job opportunities as a “moral obligation” and vows to “make sure” that such opportunities are available. But his proposal to ensure jobs for welfare recipients relies on a thoroughly neoliberal logic: in light of the law’s ostensible devolution of policy and administration to lower levels of government, Clinton will rely on his powers of persuasion to cajole state and municipal officials to fund job creation. And the president will try to convince businesses to hire welfare mothers: he will “ask” corporations to meet their responsibilities to “give” the poor a chance.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, the New Democrats’ policy approaches relied on lowering business taxes. In addition to reducing corporate costs (which represents, in effect, a down payment on the lower long-term tax obligations promised by welfare reform), this use of tax credits and related subsidies puts pressure on government revenues, working against future demands for increased social provision, and placing political and structural constraints on the capacity of social movements and sympathetic state managers even to defend existing downwardly redistributive programs. And even after the law was enacted, Clinton avoided broaching job *quality* — i.e. the wages, benefits, working conditions, employment security and prospects for advancement that welfare recipients might expect in the post-reform world. In all, New Democrat discourse on job opportunities for public aid recipients reinforced culturally resonant notions in popular common sense that existentially privilege private markets and reinforce the power of business corporations to allocate value.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Asked on *ABC: Nightline* on the evening Clinton announced he would sign the bill where the “millions of jobs” for welfare recipients would come from, Health and Human Services Secretary Donna Shalala responded, “*well, that’s the point of this proposal. It allows the governors to take the welfare money and use it to support people in jobs...or to create some jobs, or to work with the business community.*”

<sup>23</sup> Clinton’s economic ideas generally centered on neoliberal-shaded initiatives that he promoted as helping middle-income people. For example, in his 1995 State of the Union address he proposed a “Middle Class Bill of Rights” to “foster more savings and *personal responsibility*,” this included allowing tax-free withdrawals from individual retirement accounts to pay for education, health care, first-time home-buying or caring for a parent. He also touted a “GI Bill for America’s workers” which would cut federal job-retraining programs and provide private two-year vouchers to laid-off workers: “Let’s empower *people*,” Clinton intoned. “Move it from *the Government* directly to *the workers of America*.” Here, “workers” are signified as the self-interested “producers” of familiar New Right narratives, not as a social constituency with collectively defined and politically articulated interests.

Favored New Right approaches to creating wage work for welfare recipients also centered on cajoling and paying businesses: “We will have to *challenge* and *create incentives* for Texas’s *private sector* to *provide* more slots for *on-the-job* training for welfare recipients,” said governor’s aide Vince McMahan. “Government can only help bridge the gap (between ‘welfare’ and ‘work’). The *private sector* is the *job provider*,” California social services administrator Eloise Anderson proclaimed.<sup>24</sup> Again, the market “provides” jobs, and the state’s unquestioned role is to help make it profitable it do so. As I noted in the last chapter, just 0.3 percent of the total source-frames that appeared in mainstream media coverage during 1995 and 1996 criticized neoliberal welfare reform for insufficient attention to creating jobs for recipients.

New Democrat rhetoric made much of the idea that poor single mothers would be uplifted by generous training and education programs, but the 1996 law included significantly less money and many fewer federal mandates to provide such programs than even the Clinton administration had once advocated.<sup>25</sup> Along with dismissing the idea of public jobs, the neoliberal-New Right’s staunchest welfare reform advocates looked skeptically — at best — on the idea of providing these and other so-called transitional services. In its broadside at government social workers, the Hoover Institution denigrated “counseling,” “job-search preparation,” “higher education” and “eye exams” as frivolous extras, instead favoring “actual on-the-job training” (Hoover Institution 1996). Heritage’s Robert Rector counseled policymakers to “recognize the limits of job training,” noting the large public expenditures required.<sup>26</sup> Mississippi’s Don Taylor happily reported that “we may now *correctly measure the success* of our programs by *the number* of individuals *placed in the work*

<sup>24</sup> The parenthetical addition in Anderson’s quote is mine.

<sup>25</sup> The administration’s much-ballyhooed commitments to “human capital” were less than spectacular even outside the welfare law itself: “In fact, Clinton’s March 1996 budget proposal would actually spend less money relative to GDP on training, education, and industrial policy programs than did Reagan and Bush.” (Miller 1996)

<sup>26</sup> “Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond.” (April 8, 1994)



*force*, not the number enrolled in training programs that often have *no connection to the actual job market.*” (Anderson 1996)

In the dominant code, Taylor’s statement advocates programs that will prepare people for positions that the market makes available, suggesting that this will help welfare recipients better their material conditions. But the statement connotatively signifies mere exposure to wage labor as the primary goal: the “correct” way to “measure” policy “success” is simply to count how many people the state coerces into low-wage jobs; any training programs must focus on the requirements of the local labor market, rather than such programs’ potential for preparing recipients to maximize their life prospects. As I show in Chapter 6, less than 1 percent of the 1,167 specific source-messages in *USA Today* and network TV coverage of welfare reform — and just 1.4 percent of those attributed to the Clinton administration — advocated training or education programs for public assistance recipients. My evidence drawn from mass media coverage and elite discourse suggests that the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act* suffered from a severe imbalance in favor of the former.

Some conservative voices were rather aggressive in dismissing left-liberal concerns — which, again, were virtually ignored by mainstream media — about the quality of jobs that might be available to those ejected from the rolls. Haskins (2006: 50) wrote sarcastically that “millions of low-wage workers would pay taxes so that millions of mothers, many of them high-school dropouts with illegitimate children, could collect welfare benefits because the *mean capitalists* would not *just give* them a job for \$9 an hour...Wages were simply another *device* by which liberals...would try to *avoid requiring welfare mothers to work.*” Here again, it is utterly unproblematic that “capitalists” (mean or otherwise) control economic opportunity — i.e. businesses have “jobs” that they may choose to “give.” Welfare reform

implementation seems to have mostly followed this “work first” philosophy assiduously elaborated by New Right intellectuals and policymakers over several decades: “‘Any job is a good job,’ sing posters in Massachusetts welfare offices.” (Stone 2007: 191) Recounting the story of a Vietnamese refugee camp survivor who was denied entry to a specialized training program for immigrants whose graduates found positions with average hourly wages of \$10.32, and was instead forced off AFDC into a minimum-wage job, Stone (2007: 191-2) concluded that “clients are pushed to take whatever job they can get with whatever abilities they have. Training and education for a better job will have to come later, which usually means never. After welfare reform, college is no longer a proper aspiration for clients.”<sup>27</sup>

These frequent invocations of social dependency (“welfare”) as existentially opposed to personal independence (“work”) — and their attendant valorization of private market wage labor — operated ideologically to obscure a crucial dynamic of the neoliberal political economy that was being consolidated during the 1990s. Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]) argue persuasively that poor relief programs have played a key role in regulating labor to maximize business power since the early stirrings of market economies in 16<sup>th</sup>-century Europe. While the mechanisms by which this occurs have varied considerably according to specific historical conditions — and, crucially, have been shaped by the relative political power of lower-status constituencies — the basic goal has been to make even the least remunerative, most dangerous and most demeaning market job preferable to living “on the dole.” As Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]: 396) wrote during the initial phases of the contemporary anti-welfare tide: “The degraded welfare mother was thus made to serve as a

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<sup>27</sup> Besides Lynn Woolsey, the only other member of Congress who is believed to have received federal welfare benefits is Rep. Gwendolyn Moore, Democrat of Wisconsin. Under the pre-reform regime, she earned her BA in political science from Marquette University while she was a single mother receiving public assistance (see [http://gwenmoore.house.gov/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=17&Itemid=5](http://gwenmoore.house.gov/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=17&Itemid=5)).

warning to all Americans who were working more and earning less, if they were working at all. There is a fate worse, and a status lower, than hard and unrewarding work.”<sup>28</sup>

There is strong evidence to suggest that U.S. welfare reform was a state-managed political project that served class power not only by promising to reduce taxation of business owners and high-income people, but by holding down wages, benefits and working conditions and — perhaps most importantly — dampening the prospects for popular challenges to neoliberalism under the New Right hegemony. As social provision became somewhat more generous and less restrictive in the late 1960s and early 1970s — and as wage levels reached a peak under the residual influence of a strong union movement — the need arose to rationalize labor markets by readjusting the economic calculus that confronted workers (Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]: 344-67). An aggressive political pushback against unions (accelerating with Reagan’s election in 1980) was accompanied by increasing calls to “reform” welfare, which culminated in the 1996 law. By then, neoliberalization was in full swing, wages had stagnated for nearly 30 years and — spurred by material need and by the cultural and policy changes facilitated by the feminist movement — increasing numbers of lower- and middle-income women were entering employment outside the home (Stone 2007; Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]: 396-7): the political climate was ripe for articulating the interests of “workers” as against “welfare” recipients to support a policy initiative to restore proper balance between private labor markets and social provision. Making government benefits less financially remunerative, administratively harder to obtain, conditional on greater intrusions into personal autonomy and more culturally tied up with deviance removes a crucial prop for workers’ bargaining power. Delivering single mothers as commodities to

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<sup>28</sup> Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]) chart a long history of explicit and practical connections between government work (and later, training) programs, and employers’ specific demands for low-wage labor. And representatives of regional and municipal business organizations sit on policy committees that shape “welfare-to-work” programs under the 1996 law and its subsequent reauthorizations.

burgeoning low-pay, low-benefit, low-job security service industries increases competitive pressures in the labor market, further depressing wages.<sup>29</sup> And accomplishing this through a set of ideological legitimations that cultivated and reinforced racially and sexually charged animosities between “workers” and “non-workers” operated to mute and defuse potential collective action against the neoliberal turn.

Elite voices consistently propagated the right-wing populist notion that the political impetus for “reforming” the welfare system was rooted in middle- and working-class resentment at ceding hard-earned market wages to a state apparatus bent on redistributing them to irresponsible and culturally deviant shirkers. Here is how Rep. Frank Riggs, R-CA, described the new policy regime on *Nightline*: “It addresses a *fundamental fairness issue* in American society, and that is *the resentment of working individuals* toward able-bodied individuals who *refuse to get off the dole*.” Or, as Heritage’s Robert Rector wrote, “since other families don’t receive increased income when they have additional children, neither should women on AFDC and/or Food Stamps.”<sup>30</sup> In Haskins’ (2006: 50) dismissal of left-liberal worries about economic opportunity for welfare recipients (quoted above), it is “low-wage workers” (i.e. “producers”) who would be forced to “pay taxes” to support “high-school dropouts” who have “illegitimate children” and prefer to “collect welfare benefits” (i.e. those who are

<sup>29</sup> The neoliberal-New Right offensive against social provision has never been confined to AFDC or even to means-tested programs for the poor in general. Reagan’s landmark 1981 budget act and lower-profile policy moves that followed targeted a number of other programs, including but not limited to unemployment insurance and disability benefits (see Chapters 4 and 5). And neoliberal-New Right texts — particularly those distributed in more secluded intellectual arenas and not intended for wide public notice — frequently deploy similar arguments to those used against AFDC to legitimate cuts in other programs (see, e.g., Ferrera 1981). Even Medicare and Social Security, often thought of as untouchable segments of the U.S. welfare state, are not immune from challenge (in Chapter 9, I briefly discuss the advance of the neoliberal-New Right hegemony into these areas). But the success of the overall project has been crucially shaped by the political power and social-cultural construction of beneficiaries of these programs and their allies. These are interrelated processes in which, I argue, mainstream news media has played a significant role during the neoliberal era. For many of the reasons I discuss in Section III, this made AFDC and other means-tested benefits the ripest initial targets for retrenchment.

<sup>30</sup> “How to Reform Welfare.” (August 1, 1995) Rector’s statement betrays a peculiar dimension of the class-inflected contradictions in neoliberal discourse: a key component of the Contract With America was a provision (part of the “American Dream Restoration Act”) to enact a child tax credit, which would, in effect, pay women “when they have additional children” (albeit, women who — or, preferably, whose husbands — work for wages). Of course, in this case it is public coffers (rather than businesses) that would subsidize childbearing. Clinton advocated a similar credit, though New Democrat rhetoric typically lacked the harsher anti-feminist undertones of New Right discourse (see Stone 2007; Smith 2007 on the intersections of class, gender and sexuality in neoliberal welfare policy).

“unproductive”). And, of course, it is liberal elites, ever soft on the (non-working) poor, who have manipulated this scenario (presumably at the behest of their patrons in the “welfare industry”): these officials have constructed a “device” by which to avoid “requiring welfare mothers to work.”

This discourse divides the marginal poor (particularly single mothers, who, by implication, are largely non-white), on the one hand, and the “working” poor and middle class, on the other, into mutually opposed constituencies locked in a zero-sum battle for material resources and cultural recognition: as Soss et al. (2009: 12) put it, “welfare, in this frame, was not a hard-won protection for poor workers and their families; it was a policy imposed against workers’ most cherished values and basic financial interests.” Crucially, these representations also connotatively signify private market prerogatives as the baseline standard for evaluating economic practices and social relations: in Rector’s definition of the situation, private employers “don’t” provide pay raises to “other families” who have additional children, so why should government be so generous with welfare recipients? Similar, Hoover intellectuals argued against funding for public health insurance, child care and job-training programs because “tens of millions of working poor get and hold jobs” without such supportive services (Hoover Institution 1996). These moves not only articulated individualistic explanations for poverty with neoliberal policy prescriptions shaded with cultural and moral authoritarianism (as I discuss in Section III), but also blunted possibilities for “welfare” recipients and “workers” to realize the interests (and values) they share — and to translate such collective consciousness into organized political action.

### **B. Worker Rights Discourse as a Counter-Hegemonic Foundation**

Here is where the potentially counter-hegemonic perspectives that were virtually ignored by mainstream news media in 1995 and 1996 present an alternative prism for

understanding the welfare debates. As Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971], 1977) document, a vigorous “welfare rights” movement emerged in the mid-1960s to challenge the illegal denial of AFDC and other means-tested benefits. This movement — relying mostly on street protests, occupations of welfare offices and other disruptive tactics, and aided by key federal court decisions — ultimately helped to secure some benefit increases and relaxations of administrative rules. Under pressure from the rightward political swing that has accompanied neoliberalization, by the 1990s the welfare rights movement had lost much of its energy. But the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO) and allied groups did mobilize against neoliberal reform, staging dramatic protests, reaching out to sympathetic social workers, attorneys, academics and journalists, and — crucially — trying to forge connections with the U.S. labor movement (Potash and Carpenter 1997; Cook 1998).<sup>31</sup>

Welfare-rights activists and their allies offered clear counter-articulations to the dominant narrative of market individualism vs. pathological dependency. Rather than glorifying low-wage labor, these actors critiqued the neoliberal-New Right’s selective and facile anti-statism by emphasizing the coercive and governmental character of welfare reform, and highlighting the intimate links between social welfare and private markets. As alternative journalist Christopher D. Cook wrote, the new policy is “*forcing* many into *hazardous, low-wage* workfare jobs.” (Cook 1998) These formulations emphasize the political-economic entanglements of “welfare” and “work” by rearticulating the notion of “force” onto the neoliberal state and by raising the crucial question of job quality — in other words, the potential for former AFDC recipients to earn wages and benefits sufficient for a decent life under the structural conditions and political imperatives of neoliberalism. NWRO co-

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<sup>31</sup> Significantly, the union movement itself by the 1990s had entered a period of protracted internal struggle concerning how to respond to neoliberalization, including the rise of low-wage, low-benefit, part-time, temporary service industry jobs disproportionately held by women, racial minorities and immigrants (Cook 2000).

founder (and welfare recipient) Cheri Honkala described the new policy regime as entailing “*human rights* violations,” and stressed the need to “*organize* workfare mothers into existing unions or a new political force to gain employment *rights*.” (ibid) In an earlier interview, Honkala rearticulated “rights” with opportunities to attain decent material conditions: “We are...fighting for the *right to a job and a living wage*,” she said (Potash and Carpenter 1997). This discourse challenges the denigration of welfare recipients by associating the drive to improve their political-economic circumstances with notions of freedom that are deeply rooted in American popular common sense. These significations also counter the individualization of poor women — and, by extension, the roots of their poverty — by proposing a *collective* political mechanism through which they can seek to redress their grievances: not only do people’s life chances turn on factors well beyond their individual traits and behaviors, but welfare recipients — as “workers” entitled to “rights” — must “organize” themselves to mount an institutional- and structural-level challenge.

Non-governmental policy groups also conducted detailed analyses that attended to the structural connections between “welfare” and “work.” However, as I demonstrate in Chapter 6, these voices were more or less ignored in mainstream news coverage of the debate that resulted in PRWORA. For example, the Center on Law and Social Policy (CLASP) published a policy brief on the new regime that questioned “the *fundamental fairness* of requiring work without a corresponding commitment to provide *fair compensation* for the work that is performed.” (Savner 1996) These formulations critique the equity of PRWORA by signifying welfare recipients as deserving just remuneration for their labor.<sup>32</sup> Conveniently classified as still “on welfare,” workfare clients and “trainees” (many employed by private

<sup>32</sup> Compare the significations of “fundamental fairness” in the CLASP report and in Rep. Riggs’ statement on the floor of Congress, cited in Section II-A: in the latter, it is “working individuals” who “resent” people who “refuse to get off the dole” — welfare recipients were the ones being unfair to “working individuals,” and fairness would be achieved when each group faced the same hardships. In the former, fairness occurs when the state-corporate complex provides the same “rights” to welfare recipients as are at least nominally afforded other “workers.”

agencies), were not entitled to the collective bargaining rights and job-condition protections that legally recognized “workers” were. Thus, neoliberal discourse signified aid recipients as needing to be transformed into (individual) “workers” to gain the full measure of citizenship that is entailed by market participation, but until her social benefits were cut off in favor of a low-wage job, the welfare mother did not bear even the nominal rights associated with that status in the contemporary U.S. political economy. For example, in the wake of the 1996 law welfare-rights and union activists pressured San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown to create workfare grievance procedures and to credit workfare toward seniority for future civil service jobs. Thus, an AFL-CIO official’s description of the *legal* fights to gain worker classification for welfare recipients also highlights the importance of challenging the *discursive* boundaries between “welfare” and “work” in any movement to resist neoliberal imperatives: “The ‘struggle for recognition,’” he said, “rests upon a potentially unifying principle — the need to gain employee status.” (Cook 1998)

In addition to analyzing the design and administration of welfare reform in terms of its potential to help people obtain living-wage employment with attendant legal rights and protections, non-governmental groups offered an opening for exploring the systemic connections between “welfare” and “work” by raising the possibility that employers would respond to the addition of public aid recipients to the pool of low-wage labor by laying off or reducing the hours of existing workers: as CLASP put it, the new law carried “serious risks for the displacement of incumbent workers.” (Savner 1996) This analysis suggests that welfare reform was more likely to increase competition between low-wage workers — thus depressing wages, benefits and employment conditions — than to increase total employment, let alone to improve material conditions among the poor substantially. Even so-called unpaid “work experience programs” (i.e. menial, “community service” work in



return for benefits checks) might undermine the pay and conditions of those currently employed by municipal contractors to clean streets and parks: localities that can employ a welfare recipient at a very low cost may prompt contract agencies to cut the hours or freeze the wages of existing workers. These potential effects of “workfare” programs on low-wage labor markets were never raised over 20 months of network TV and *USA Today* news coverage.<sup>33</sup>

CLASP’s report also noted that fulfilling the nominal goals of welfare reform “will likely require a substantial new job creation effort. Efforts to use welfare funds to subsidize employment in the private sector have yet to demonstrate an ability to create substantial numbers of new job opportunities. Unpaid work experience may more easily be used to create large numbers of positions, but in the past such programs have had a poor record of preparing participants for unsubsidized jobs.”<sup>34</sup> (Savner 1996) Researchers have documented an extensive list of the “failures” of these programs starting in the 1960s (Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]: 387-95). This suggests that U.S. policymakers’ continued reliance on private-subsidy approaches (greatly intensified through PRWORA) is due to their legitimation and promotion of business power: as I argued above, exposing more people to the low-wage labor market reduces workers’ bargaining power along a number of dimensions, and under the new welfare regime people may be ejected from the rolls for reaching time limits (among other reasons) whether or not they have secured wage employment.

Welfare-rights activists articulated cultural representations centered on “rights” and calls for collective mobilization with policy proposals that challenge the neoliberal consensus

<sup>33</sup> Just 0.3 percent of the 1,167 source-messages propagated through the mass media outlets I analyzed addressed neoliberal welfare reform’s potentially negative effects on the broader economy in any sense. *USA Today* coverage disseminated none of these messages. And just one out of 114 total news reports in 1995 and 1996 was primarily focused on the policy’s macroeconomic dimensions.

<sup>34</sup> As I show in Chapter 6, messages raising the need for job-creation efforts accounted for just 0.3 percent of the total in mainstream news coverage.

by demanding systemic public investment in employment that ensures a decent living: activists were seeking “to *redefine and expand public-sector work on a massive scale.*” (Cook 1998) As Honkala put it, aid recipients are entitled to “*guaranteed transition into living-wage jobs.*” Crucially, under this potentially counter-hegemonic framework jobs must be “guaranteed.” Unlike the New Democrat-New Right formulations favored by mainstream media, this interpretive lens apprehends the systemic character of poverty in the United States: failure to mandate living-wage jobs merely transforms nominal “dependence” on government power into dependence on business power. In some versions of this oppositional discourse, private markets would lose their unchallenged prerogatives not only to allocate economic opportunity to individuals and families, but also to determine the substance and form of production and investment. As Frances Fox Piven said, “one role we can play in job creation is advocating for more *public-sector service programs that are useful for people,*’ such as child care and 24-hour community centers. ‘I want to create jobs because I think *the work is needed by the community.*’” (Cook 1998) Instead of relying solely on the imperatives of private profit, under these arrangements “work” is valued and created for the benefits it offers people in their capacities as individual human beings and caregivers, and for the social good that flows from creating stronger and more humane communities.

In sum, during the mid-1990s organized welfare recipients and their allies were attempting to unite with labor unions to forge common interests and to advocate policy approaches that would improve the economic, social and political prospects for all “workers” under neoliberalism. But these efforts garnered essentially no mainstream news coverage: as Honkala said, “we’re dealing with a blackout in terms of the media. Our silence is killing us.” (Potash and Carpenter 1997)

### III. Gender, Race and Neoliberal Paternalism: Helping Women by “Roughing Them Up”

As I discuss in Chapter 2, New Right actors have legitimated neoliberal economic and social welfare policy in significant measure through cultural appeals that join deeply resonant fragments of popular common sense to policies that encourage or impose traditional Judeo-Christian morality. These articulations played a key role in justifying welfare reform by connecting racial animosities and sexual tensions to policy moves that would increase business power by dividing popular constituencies in ways that muted political challenges to the neoliberal hegemony. While New Democrat voices were somewhat less aggressive and explicit in this register, their basic presuppositions were much the same.

By individualizing and personalizing the sources of material hardship in the ways I describe in Section II-A, neoliberal-New Right discourse has proceeded to articulate poverty — and social benefits recipients themselves — with a host of moral and cultural pathologies. These moves, in turn, have effectively legitimated neoliberal-paternalist governance strategies that under welfare reform have taken the form of intensive and aggressive mechanisms to change the cultural norms, social practices and personal behaviors of welfare mothers. Because of the thoroughly racialized character of public debate over U.S. poverty policy (see, e.g., Quadagno 1994; Gilens 1999) in the connotative code these representations have been further articulated with constructions of African Americans as especially morally depraved and culturally backward, and thus, most in need of disciplinary (and ostensibly therapeutic) interventions to help them join mainstream, market society. This narrative imagines that people (especially single black women) are poor because they refuse to “work” and maintain monogamous relationships, and they refuse to work and marry because they are caught in a culture of sexual license and other hedonisms. This “welfare lifestyle” is reciprocally

reinforcing, in that reliance on social benefits (which is caused in the first place by personal and cultural pathologies) leads to yet more such pathologies that are in turn passed on to children, who begin the cycle of deviancy again. The policy response is to impose harsh disciplinary measures to “move” poor women from “welfare” to “work” both in terms of their sources of material sustenance, and in terms of their personal attitudes and cultural norms — from “dependency,” “irresponsibility” and immorality to “independence,” “personal responsibility” and morality.

### **A. How the War on Poverty and the Age of Aquarius Destroyed American Civilization**

One of the remarkable ironies of the neoliberal drive for welfare reform is the intensity and frequency with which political actors (working through a largely complicit mainstream news media) at once claimed to be populist insurgents<sup>35</sup> opposing “big government,” and advocated an arguably unprecedented expansion of state powers and capacities to monitor and discipline even the most intimate aspects of poor people’s lives. New Right legitimations for such moves rest in the first place on a narrative that articulates the liberal social and economic policies of the Great Society period with cultural shifts since the 1960s that have challenged traditional gender and sexual hierarchies and threatened to pull American society into moral decadence. Gingrich — a former history professor and author of the appropriately titled *Renewing American Civilization* — has been especially aggressive in propagating these ideas. For instance, he told Heritage Foundation leaders just after the 1994 election:

I believe we are faced with a *crisis of our civilization*. . . .it is impossible to *maintain civilization* with 12-year-olds having babies, with 15-year-olds killing each other, with

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<sup>35</sup> New Right financier Richard Scaife introduced Gingrich at a Heritage Foundation event as “a reform-minded champion of the underdog, whether a disadvantaged preschooler or a blue collar guy trying to make it someplace; a streetwise intellectual; an historian; and a great patriot.” “What Elections Mean to Conservatives.” (November 15, 1994)

17-year-olds dying of AIDS, and with 18-year-olds getting diplomas they can't even read... We have tolerated the rise of a *decadent society* in which brutality and barbarism are accepted on a scale that is not imaginable to any decent person, and this is *a crisis across the entire civilization*.

Earlier in the speech, the soon-to-be-House speaker asserted that “we don’t particularly want to have a single ounce of compromise with those who still believe that they can somehow improve and prop up and make work a *bureaucratic welfare state* and a *counterculture set of values which are literally killing the poor*.” He then claims that “the *counterculture’s values don’t require a work ethic*, don’t require savings, don’t require studying (after all, those are judgmental).”<sup>36</sup> Here, Gingrich articulates the 1960s (in this code, “counterculture” signifies sexual promiscuity, drug abuse and attacks on traditional religious and social mores in general) with laziness, dependency, irresponsibility and a liberal social welfare agenda that is “literally killing the poor.”

By the 1990s, New Right missives against the liberal elite had come to strongly embrace attacks on entertainment media that — because of its purported control by 1960s radicals sympathetic to the “counterculture” — promotes sexual irresponsibility, drug use, disrespect for religion and general social rebellion. In his speech to the Heritage Foundation, Pete Wilson articulated the “*perverse values* promoted by our *popular media*” with the “*perverse values* promoted by the *federal welfare system*.” He further linked these discursive representations to a policy proposal (ultimately included in a companion bill to PRWORA) to deny federal disability payments to anyone labeled a substance-abuser — as he called them, “individuals whose only disability is *self-inflicted* drug and alcohol abuse.” “What alcoholic would pass up a chance to *have the taxpayers pick up their bar tabs*?” Wilson asked

<sup>36</sup> “What Elections Mean to Conservatives.” (November 15, 1994)

Heritage donors. Overall, the goal of welfare reform and the broader conservative-populist resurgence is to “chang(ing) a tragically permissive culture.”<sup>37</sup>

In constructing contemporary social decline as driven by (counter)culture (“popular media”) and the liberal state (“federal welfare system”), New Right voices mystify political-economic dimensions by obscuring the role of corporate interests in the operation of both institutions: it is (morally permissive and collectivistic) liberal elites who have colonized media and government alike, threatening “American civilization” by oppressing (morally upright and individualistic) private market actors (citizens and businesses). Notably, “alcoholics” (and, by extension, illegal drug abusers) and “taxpayers” are signified as binary, separate categories: Wilson’s discourse suggests that a person can be in one or the other group — i.e. someone who uses government checks to fuel her “self-inflicted” hedonistic lifestyle, or someone whose self-disciplined, honest labor generates the taxes that cover those checks. Frequently, the neoliberal-New Right’s anti-1960s discourse has blurred its signifiers to construct social benefits receipt itself as a drug: as Wisconsin Governor Tommy Thompson told National Organization for Women President Patricia Ireland, “let’s face it, the welfare system in the last 60 years has been a *welfare narcotic*. It has locked generations and generations of families into dependency.”<sup>38</sup>

Not long after the GOP takeover of Congress, mass media refracted this sexualized narrative in a way that reinforced key assumptions of neoliberal-New Right welfare policy. On January 12, 1995, CBS commentator Joe Klein (whose political leanings are generally

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<sup>37</sup> Wilson’s title, “Kicking America’s *Welfare Habit: Politics, Illegitimacy and Personal Responsibility*,” exemplifies key cultural articulations in support of neoliberal-New Right social policy. Like the hedonistic drug use that is said to be rife among public assistance clients, “welfare” itself is an addiction for recipients and liberal apologists alike. Sexual laxity (“illegitimacy”) is associated with social programs. “Politics” is articulated connotatively with the corrupt (and, itself, “illegitimate”) liberal state (as opposed to the transparent and apolitical private market). Policy responses should center on “personal” (not collective) “responsibility:” work requirements, time limits and the inculcation of cultural normativity through benefits sanctions and moral “educational” programs.

<sup>38</sup> *NBC Nightly News* (August 22, 1996).

described as Clintonite-New Democrat) opened a piece on welfare reform with footage of Gingrich standing in front of the new (almost exclusively white, male) congressional leadership, thundering, “I would insist that it is impossible to maintain American civilization with 12-year-olds having babies.” We then see Klein standing at an urban street-corner, where he begins:

There is some moral logic to this. Society should send a clear message to young people: having children out of wedlock is wrong. Almost every recent study shows that children born to single teenaged parents are more likely to commit crimes, get sick, do drugs, drop out of school, and have children too early themselves. But one wonders if Republicans aren’t making the same mistake that Democrats have made in the past: overestimating the impact that government can have on the lives of the poor.

Viewers are then shown sexually suggestive images from an R&B music video (helpfully labeled “music video” on the bottom of the screen), as Klein notes that “the welfare check isn’t the only message an indigent teenaged mother receives from society. It isn’t even the most important message.” The report proceeds to a quick sequence of clips ranging from talk shows to perfume advertisements, with Klein proclaiming: “There’s a steady stream of others on TV about the importance of *enjoying yourself* and *indulging your wildest fantasies*. And subtler messages that say the only way to be happy is to spend money, rather than save it, to just do it, whatever ‘it’ may be.” Klein sums up the issue after viewers are offered a glimpse of a credit card commercial: “Conservatives are probably right: if you subsidize something, in this case out-of-wedlock births, you’re likely to get more of it. But it’s going to be very hard for government to send a message about *the importance of restraint*, if the rest of society seems in the midst of a *great big orgy*.”

Even as this report is constructed as laying out the contending sides of an ideological debate, Klein presents the opposite poles in this debate as coinciding with two interlinked aspects of the neoliberal-New Right narrative: illegitimate” births (which I discuss in more

detail in Section III-B) are implicitly signified as causing increases in welfare receipt, while the causes of single-parenthood are offered as either 1) generous social subsidies handed out by the liberal state or 2) sexually charged popular media (produced, implicitly, by the 1960s retreads that form the “Hollywood elite,” and performed by African-American artists). While the report briefly attends to wider social forces by broaching the issue of consumerism (showing the credit card ad as Klein notes the virtues of “saving money”), the market logics that animate the contemporary U.S. political economy are generally ignored: as in Wilson’s speech, the role of corporate power in fueling both (the material immiseration that leads to) welfare receipt, and (the culture-industry propaganda and economic insecurity that leads to) frivolous materialism and rising debt, make no appearance. Indeed, Klein never raises the matter of why people are poor in the first place, although the subtext of his report is consistent with an individualistic explanation centered on personal moral failure (especially sexual laxity) as promoted by a permissive liberal establishment.

These basic understandings informed the welfare discourse not only of politicians like Gingrich and Wilson, and ostensibly “liberal” media pundits like Klein, but of the state administrators who would implement the new regime. As Texas official Vince McMahan told the Hoover *Policy Review*: “Governor Bush...recognizes that *out-of-wedlock births, hard-core drug use, and violent juvenile crime* are *fundamentally moral and spiritual problems* that can’t be solved by government alone. The solution to these problems lies in *changing the culture, renewing our commitment to God, and returning to our bedrock values.*” His California counterpart, Eloise Anderson, proclaimed that “*the real work of moving out of dependency must be done by the recipients.* We must shift from the notion that government has the answers and will *rescue people from themselves,*” and predicted that welfare reform would lead to “*cultural mainstreaming.*” Such constructions suggest that symptoms of social disorder — and, by implication, poverty itself



— are personal and cultural phenomena that require personal and cultural policy interventions. As Heritage’s Robert Rector proclaimed, “it is a *chasm of values and behavior* which today separates the underclass and the chronically poor from the American middle class.”<sup>39</sup> This discourse signifies that the way to “rescue” recipients — and facilitate their moral and spiritual renewal — is to help them make themselves into attractive labor commodities on the neoliberal market. Gingrich was explicit about this vision in a speech to the Heritage Foundation in which he looked toward a future in which Americans have “the *best productivity*, with the *highest take-home pay*, instead of the *greatest range of choices of lifestyles*.”<sup>40</sup>

### **B. Sex and Gender in Welfare Discourse: “Illegitimacy” as Ideological Legitimation**

Cash aid for the poor in the modern U.S. system of social provision has focused mostly on single-parent families, which under patriarchal cultural and political-economic conditions has generally meant unmarried mothers with school-age children. This means that welfare’s moral reformation mission has primarily targeted women — and women’s sexuality — for disciplinary intervention. Dominant discourse has linked culturally resonant fragments of common sense demanding women’s purity that are rooted in traditional Judeo-Christian morality with closely related beliefs in gender hierarchy. And under neoliberalism, reform advocates connected these notions to policy tools that promise both moral-cultural normalization and the delivery of poor women to labor markets on terms that are friendly to business. Welfare reform discourse has operated in the negative ideological register to obscure — and thus, denigrate — care-work (i.e. “women’s work”), especially that done by poor single women (Stone 2007). This rhetoric has served further to legitimate and justify the control of women’s sexuality through policy mechanisms like mandated “abstinence-only” education and a curiously designed “paternafare” system to collect child support

<sup>39</sup> “Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond.” (April 8, 1994)

<sup>40</sup> “What Elections Mean to Conservatives.” (November 15, 1994)

(Smith 2007). These moves reflect the historic tendency of right-wing populist movements to play on mass economic and cultural insecurities by scapegoating marginalized social groups (Berlet and Lyons 2000). As Piven (1996) wrote in the wake of PRWORA, neoliberal welfare reform advocates were “pointing to the failures of poor women as an explanation for the cultural ruptures and economic insecurities of contemporary American life.”

This demonization of low-income single mothers turns crucially on the ideological device of “illegitimacy.” The word itself — New Right voices are particularly fond of this signifier — operates to stigmatize single mothers and their children as socially deviant and inadequate, with the long list of pathologies linked to such a family structure — seen, for example, in Klein’s CBS News report — buttressing this construction (Smith 2007). While both New Right and New Democrat voices relied heavily on arguments fingering out-of-wedlock births as a key cause of poverty and social disease, the former more often claimed that “illegitimacy” itself is at the root of social decline:

History and common sense both show that *values and abilities within families*, not family incomes, lead to children’s success. Families with higher incomes tend to have *sound values concerning self-control, deferred gratification, work, education, and marriage* which they pass on to their children.<sup>41</sup>

Rector distinguished “material poverty” from “behavioral poverty,” arguing that the latter is caused primarily by the government-subsidized formation of families headed by single women, with “Uncle Sam’s welfare check serving as a surrogate father.”<sup>42</sup> Citing the rising national standard of living since the 1950s — but ignoring the intensely unequal and widening distribution of the proceeds from economic growth — Rector asserts that, “in reality, there is little material poverty in the U.S. in the sense understood by the public.” In a later piece, he goes so far as to claim that receiving welfare itself lowers children’s IQ,

<sup>41</sup> Robert Rector. “Why Congress Must Reform Welfare.” Heritage Foundation (December 4, 1995). Rector ignores the possibility that higher incomes lead to social opportunities that promote healthy attitudes and behaviors.

<sup>42</sup> “Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond.” (April 8, 1994)

inferring causality from a study in which the meaning of the link is at best unclear.<sup>43</sup> When discussing single parenthood — which Rector called “America’s number-one social problem” — New Right actors often deployed signifiers evoking imminent and existential crisis (“catastrophic,” “calamities,” “devastated,” “grim reality,” “collapse,” “skyrocketing rise,” “tragedy,” “coffin”): as Rector concludes, “marriage in America is dying.”<sup>44</sup>

Welfare administrators echoed this discourse, albeit usually in less bombastic language. Wisconsin’s Jason Turner was blunt in his hopes for the future: “Let us look forward to the day when *illegitimacy replaces poverty as our most-discussed social indicator.*” Mississippi’s Don Taylor said a crucial goal of reform was to “*encourage marriage rather than reward irresponsible behavior*” And then-Texas Gov. Bush’s policy aide said “we will have to *restore the virtue and value of fatherhood.*”<sup>45</sup> This demonization of “illegitimacy” and related personal failures as articulated with material deprivation operates to justify neoliberal welfare reform by valorizing the low-wage work that markets demand. If “material poverty” is not a concern, then policymakers and citizens need not worry about the quality of jobs that “reformed” welfare mothers would be required to seek. It also serves to reinforce the separation between the “working poor” and the “welfare poor” that helps to mute political challenges to neoliberalism by marking the latter as social and cultural deviants.

New Democrat welfare reform discourse also reserved a key place for the moral deficiencies signified by extra-marital childbirth. Clinton was vociferous in his condemnation of teenagers having babies out of wedlock, telling the National Association of Counties in a March 7, 1995, speech broadcast live on CNN: “We must discourage *irresponsible behavior* that *lands people on welfare in the first place.* We must tell our children not to have children until they

<sup>43</sup> “Really Stand for Children: Fix Welfare.” (June 6, 1996)

<sup>44</sup> “Welfare Reform and the Death of Marriage.” (February 22, 1996)

<sup>45</sup> While all the GOP-sponsored welfare proposals included, among other elements, a mixture of work requirements and programs designed to encourage marriage, New Right interest groups frequently criticized various plans (including the one proposed in the Contract With America) for not focusing enough on promoting traditional family formation.

are married and ready to be good parents... This issue is eating the heart out of this country.” Policymakers must send “a clear message about abstinence and responsible parenting.” The president prompted a round of applause from county officials when he repeated his frequent claim about “the epidemic of teen pregnancies and births where there is no marriage” (as he put it in his 1995 State of the Union speech): “If we could get rid of that, we wouldn’t have a welfare problem, and we’d be talking about something else.” Indeed, while the administration opposed a Republican plan to mandate that welfare benefits be denied to all teenaged single mothers (PRWORA gave states the option to do this), Clinton’s assertion that teen pregnancy is “our number-one social problem” probably would have been well received at a Heritage Foundation luncheon, had the audience been unfamiliar with the speaker’s identity.<sup>46</sup>

New Democrats’ focus on the personal roots of deprivation in young single motherhood further legitimated their relative lack of attention to the systemic and structural dimensions of poverty and social degradation — and thus, their failure to challenge private market prerogatives. As I discussed above, after a fleeting and vague flirtation with the idea of funding public jobs, Clinton stuck mostly to advocating wage-subsidy programs, and rhetorically “challenging” businesses to hire poor single women (on whatever terms suit employers): as he described an effective pitch to the private sector when speaking to county leaders, “*you’re going to pay whatever you’re going to pay at this job. This will replace some of what you’ll have to pay. Put these people to work. Give them a chance. Give them a chance to earn something.*” Again, the quality of job opportunities is of little concern, while Clinton appeals to employers’ sense of generosity and social responsibility (“give them a chance”), helped along by a public subsidy to maintain their competitive position.

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<sup>46</sup> This quote is from the 1995 State of the Union address.

The president ended this 1995 talk with a favorite anecdote from his gubernatorial days, which concerns comments he attributed to an Arkansas welfare recipient when he invited her to speak to a governors' panel during a conference in Hilton Head, SC. According to Clinton, Lillie Harden claimed that she favored state-mandated work and job training because "a lot of people like me, *we lose all our self-confidence*, we don't think we amount to much. If you don't *make us do it* we'll *just lay up and watch the soaps*." Harden went on to say that the greatest benefit of reform was that when her son was asked at school what his mother did for a living, "my boy can give an answer." The story prompted hearty laughter — then applause — from county officials, but its gender implications are serious: Clinton's discourse articulates psychological-spiritual failure and incapacity ("we lose all our self-confidence"), with the need for coercive "welfare-to-work" policies ("make us do it"), with a stereotypically feminine signification of laziness ("just lay up and watch the soaps"), and with single mothers as non-workers (until neoliberal reform, they didn't "do" anything).

By signifying poor unwed mothers as people who refuse to "work," New Right-New Democrat articulations degraded the already low status of care-work in American society (Stone 2007; Smith 2007: 82-4). Their intense valorization of (private-sector) work — and its personal and cultural entailments — as sacred implicitly signaled that caring for family members and maintaining a household is not only worthless but shameful:

When reform advocates talk about wage work, they make it sound almost holy, and certainly redemptive, transformative, and character building. . . Sounding more like a parson than a state official, New York City's welfare commissioner, Jason Turner, explained why he planned to make work requirements so stringent: 'Work is one's own gift to others, and when you sever that relationship with your fellow man, you're doing more than harm yourself economically. You're doing spiritual harm.' (Stone 2007: 190)<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Turner left Wisconsin's welfare department in 1997 to join New York Mayor Rudy Giuliani's administration.

This rhetoric denigrating poor single mothers not only obscured the structural and systemic forces that condition material opportunity and social reproduction. It also legitimated neoliberal welfare reform's role in sating business demand for unorganized (and culturally marginalized) workers who would accept low wages and poor working conditions in a macroeconomic environment marked by low nominal levels of unemployment. The new regime's discouragement of single parenthood fits coherently in this interpretation: in addition to reducing the imperatives to fund child-care programs, the policy encourages the formation of a population that is more amenable to the "flexibility" entailed by low-wage service industry jobs, such as overnight and weekend work (Smith 2007: 82). And by reinforcing gender and sexual divisions among lower-status constituencies, this discourse made the construction of social solidarity between welfare mothers and wage workers more difficult: when poor, single (lazy, promiscuous) women are blamed for siphoning hard-earned tax money generated by (energetic, married) male "producers," the common interests and identities essential to mobilizing broad political challenges are rendered less visible.

In addition to devaluing family care and the other forms of work that poor mothers have always engaged in, New Right-New Democrat welfare reform discourse operated to support neoliberal imperatives by justifying and legitimating intensive measures to supervise and discipline women's sexuality. Despite the thin evidence for their effectiveness in reducing teen pregnancy rates, PRWORA included the largest-ever federal investment in abstinence-only sex education programs (Haskins 2006; Smith 2007). New Right actors argued vigorously for these approaches, claiming that easier access to birth control beginning in the 1960s was one of the major causes of social and cultural breakdown. And, of course, there would be no funding for abortion services or counseling. Conservatives argued that

mothers intent on divorce who refused to immediately enroll in work programs should receive benefits in the form of loans, conditional on their completion of “cooling off periods” during which they should reconsider the decision to leave their husbands. However, “eventually, direct federal payments to unwed mothers of all ages should be eliminated.”<sup>48</sup> PRWORA also created greater opportunities for states and localities to establish supervised maternity homes for young single mothers. And the act instituted the most ambitious federal effort to date to collect child support from non-custodial parents, an effort whose clear focus was to reimburse government coffers for welfare benefits rather than to improve the material conditions of poor single women, and which — despite the vaguely feminist tones that covered its supporting rhetoric — may have implications that are deeply dangerous for poor women’s physical safety, economic security and social self-determination (Smith 2007).

New Right actors frequently signified poor, young, single women as in need of moral correction. A Heritage Foundation policy brief proposed that federal reforms should follow the lead of California’s 1977 “Pregnancy Freedom of Choice Act”<sup>49</sup> in funding privately run, heavily supervised maternity homes: such facilities “remove young mothers for a time from a *dependency culture*” and replace the idea of “cash aid as a matter of right” with “moral education and reformation.” The author of this policy paper (identified in the Heritage archives only as “George W.”) emphasizes that in such maternity homes, “the behavior of the mothers would be closely monitored. There would be *no cash for drugs, cigarettes, alcohol, and non-working boyfriends.*” He argued that costs could be controlled by using mental hospitals left vacant after court-ordered deinstitutionalization, or unused wings of public hospitals in

<sup>48</sup> “Combating Family Disintegration, Crime, and Dependence: Welfare Reform and Beyond.” (April 8, 1994)

<sup>49</sup> The name of this law, which was heavily promoted by anti-abortion activists, exemplifies a key set of New Right significations: by announcing the “freedom of choice” (to carry a pregnancy to term), it suggests vaguely that the liberal state had previously forced or encouraged young women to have abortions.

areas that were rapidly losing population as their economies contracted.<sup>50</sup> In this vision, the deindustrialization that has accompanied the neoliberal turn opens up an opportunity for traditional moral regeneration. While PRWORA ultimately did not include the levels of dedicated funding and federal mandates for such group homes that many New Right voices advocated, by removing welfare's entitlement status, it allowed states and localities to more easily institute such approaches.<sup>51</sup>

While New Democrat policymakers succeeded in keeping conservative proposals for forced placement of teen mothers in group homes out of the final bill, the Clinton administration did vigorously champion PRWORA's provisions for making "deadbeat dads" pay for the poor children they sired. While the legitimating rhetoric for these provisions focused on "an apparently unassailable objective" (Smith 2007: 68), it concealed key dimensions of the program that would arguably be quite harmful to poor women, as well as to the material conditions and social-political agency of low-income people generally. PRWORA provided federal funding for a nationwide database to enforce child support, and instituted penalties such as the revocation of driver's and professional licenses, and more aggressive wage garnishment. It also mandated that women applying for or receiving public assistance make a "good-faith effort" to identify the fathers of their children. Under most circumstances, any money that was obtained from "deadbeat dads" would go to the state, rather than directly to custodial mothers.<sup>52</sup>

Advocates of neoliberal welfare reform typically portrayed fathers as willfully denying money for their children. For example, in his 1995 speech to the National

<sup>50</sup> "Addressing Illegitimacy: The Root of Real Welfare Reform." (April 6, 1995)

<sup>51</sup> The Heritage writer claims that tightly supervised maternity homes were gaining favor across the political spectrum, citing the endorsement of the "liberal" Progressive Policy Institute. This is a so-called "third way" research and advocacy organization promoting neoliberal-New Democrat tenets and closely connected to the Democratic Leadership Council.

<sup>52</sup> My analyses of mainstream media coverage indicate that the news rarely covered the specific provisions of child-support collection under PRWORA.



Association of Counties, Clinton excoriated “people who *refuse* to pay their child support.” According to my analysis of network TV and *USA Today* coverage, welfare reformers never raised the issue of fathers’ practical ability to pay to the state’s satisfaction when many of them barely covered their own needs in low-wage jobs. As Smith (2007: 64) put it, “given the class-segregated nature of American society, and the fact that poverty is often a life-long condition, it is hardly surprising that the male sexual partners of poor women are also poor.” Moreover, many poor single fathers (and their extended families) contribute to their children informally outside the child-support system — financially, practically and emotionally (Stone 2007). By threatening women with the loss of benefits if they do not establish paternity, PRWORA may actually harm them and their children by upsetting such delicate arrangements. These provisions probably have also deterred many women — especially those whose partners have been abusive — from applying for welfare in the first place (Smith 2007). In addition, the new law may encourage many men to go “underground” to avoid the heavy burden of reimbursing the state for welfare costs. This supports business power by adding to the pool of low-wage, informal workers — workers who live outside the protection of labor laws and social benefit programs, and are less likely to register to vote or join unions. On the other hand, if men decide to cooperate with the system they may be more passive in the workplace, fearing even more intensely the loss of their jobs (Smith 2007: 61-66): “In sum, paternafare may yield similar results with both the fleeing payers and the cooperating payers, namely an aversion to participation in collective forms of worker resistance.” (ibid: 66)

Discourse in support of neoliberal welfare reform was shot through with explicitly religious significations, particularly in its New Right versions. And, indeed, PROWRA substantially increased opportunities for publicly funded “faith-based” moral interventions

to instill proper behavior among poor women, although not as aggressively as some conservative voices preferred: as Heritage's Robert Rector wrote, "ample research shows that the church is the institution best suited to instill the values that encourage these behaviors."<sup>53</sup> New Right welfare narratives glorified the pre-New Deal period of primarily private (often religiously-based) charity as the basis on which contemporary policy should be built: in Rector's words, "America's descent into the *welfare abyss* is a relatively recent development."<sup>54</sup> Gingrich told the National Association of Counties:

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a *volunteer* for every two poor people...it was a *personal* and a *caring* relationship. And *compassion didn't mean writing a check and sending your taxes*, compassion meant *giving of yourself*. It is a different model and it's one we have to return to if we're truly serious about saving the children.<sup>55</sup>

Here, the House majority leader echoes seminal themes of Reagan's earlier voluntaristic discourse by articulating the (impersonal, cold) economic coercion of the liberal state in opposition the "personal," "caring," "compassionate" and "giving" nature of private charity.

Of course, this "compassion" cannot be unconditional. One Heritage Foundation text lamented that "welfare organizations which formerly emphasized the accountability of a recipient and sought *improvements in behavior and values* have been transformed into giant check-writing machines."<sup>56</sup> The author cites favorably Gunnar Myrdal's claim in a 1940 book that "the unwed mother tends — although there are many exceptions — to have *looser morals and lower standards*, and in this respect does not provide the proper milieu for her child." A Hoover Institution essay lamented the "giveaway mission" of modern social work, arguing that "*neediness could play a positive, motivating role*... Intermediate levels of deprivation — or the anticipation of such — *motivate constructive choices*, from getting up in the morning to go to work, to avoiding *bad habits* like gambling, alcohol abuse, and overeating." The writer quotes

<sup>53</sup> "How to Reform Welfare." (August 1, 1995)

<sup>54</sup> "How to Reform Welfare." (August 1, 1995)

<sup>55</sup> This speech was delivered on March 7, 1995. CNN broadcast selected footage that day.

<sup>56</sup> "Addressing Illegitimacy: The Root of Real Welfare Reform." (April 6, 1995)

with approval a 19<sup>th</sup>-century social worker's view that while shoddy construction is partly to blame, poor people's homes are "tenfold worse because the *tenants' habits and lives* are what they are. Transplant them tomorrow to healthy and commodious homes, and they would *pollute and destroy* them." This is a "balanced, logical view," the Hoover Institution (1996) argues, ignoring the racially and ethnically biased assumptions that often informed these earlier assessments of poor people's lifestyles.

In signifying (female) poverty as individually and personally driven — and thus, in need of spiritually informed correction — this discourse obscured political-economic dimensions by implying that material suffering prompts a soul-nourishing self-discipline. In this understanding, it is inconceivable that the stress and insecurity of deprivation might lead one to abuse food, alcohol or illegal drugs, or to succumb to social despair and quick fixes like gambling (and of course, junk food, alcohol and gambling are all promoted aggressively by corporate entities with an interest in profit). The "obvious vices — drunkenness, gambling, extramarital sex, idleness, and so forth" that 19<sup>th</sup>-century moral reformers (unlike today's "welfare bureaucrats") were so clear on (Hoover Institution 1996) are harmful because they collide with the individualistic "work ethic" that fuels markets. And "intermediate levels of deprivation" are salutary because they drive people to sell their labor on terms favorable to business.

While the religious overtones of New Democrat welfare discourse were less overt, similar themes appeared in more subtle ways. For instance, Clinton's "New Covenant" philosophy — unveiled in the wake of the Contract With America and the GOP takeover of Congress — articulated notions of individual moral responsibility with communal concern. Of course, "covenant" itself is a signifier with deeply religious connotations within the Judeo-Christian register in popular common sense. Still, on the whole, New Democrat

discourse tended to rely on less sectarian significations for the moral renewal that welfare reform promised the poor: as Clinton declared in his 1993 State of the Union message, “we’ll change the whole focus of our poverty programs from *entitlement* to *empowerment*.” Here, the new regime for social provision would assist poor women in reaching their human potential not only by helping them shed bad personal habits, but by exposing them to the dignity of wage work as the freely contracting, utility-maximizing economic agents of neoliberal dogma.

My analysis of mainstream news coverage in 1995 and 1996 indicates that religious dimensions of the drive for welfare reform received almost not attention. One exception came in a CBS News special report aired on New Year’s Eve 1995. Here is how anchor John Roberts introduced the segment:

There’s a radical experiment in welfare reform going on in the state of Mississippi. Government and churches have joined forces trying to get single mothers *off the dole* and *into jobs*. That’s tonight’s Sunday Cover: *whether the missing key to success is faith*.

In reproducing the stark dichotomy between “welfare” and “work” that I discuss above, this introduction implies that “success” in improving the welfare system lies simply in “get(ing) single mothers off the dole and into jobs.” And by suggesting that religion may be the crucial ingredient, it draws viewers’ attention to the individual and personal dimensions of poverty.

Under the state program, approved in a waiver of pre-PRWORA federal rules, churches “are asked to *adopt* welfare families, mentor them, help them find jobs so they can get off public assistance.” Thus, single mothers are signified as children who need to be “adopted.” Their failure to become “self-sufficient” is due to a lack of proper “mentoring” which would motivate self-discipline and effort. As minister Ronald Moore assures a group of women in his church, “I don’t care how many times you fall. All you have to do is *have the will* to get up.” The program entails individually focused approaches aimed at instilling the

routines and practices that welfare mothers need to succeed in the labor market:

“participants attend weekly meetings at the church learning *simple skills*: job interviewing, personal appearance, budgeting,” Roberts reports. Thus, what women require to be successful are “simple skills” — such as how to make themselves look good and how to make their meager resources go further.

Church members volunteer by transporting participants to job interviews and providing child care, but the program also seeks to “teach moral values,” Roberts says. The Rev. Moore proceeds to articulate failure with the absence of “moral authority” in poor women’s lives: “We believe that when that *authority* is present, that person then takes on a *responsibility*, becomes engaged and tries to be the *best individual* that they can be,” he says. “We’ve tried to treat all of the effects of the problems, but we have not done anything to treat *the causes*.” In this formulation, the poor are again signified as children, needing a firm hand to guide them to behave in “responsible” ways: the “causes” of poverty lie clearly in moral turpitude and spiritual squalor. The CBS report includes one quote from an American Civil Liberties Union representative claiming that the “Faith and Families” program violates the separation of church and state, followed by Roberts’ statement that “churches insist they don’t push religion on participants, but if they want to attend services, that’s just fine with them.” But the story includes no other dissenting perspectives on the initiative. Most importantly, the report’s presuppositions foreclose any discussion of the systemic or structural dimensions of poverty.

The responses of female Republican congressional representatives to the welfare reform debate exemplify this overwhelming focus on the individual causes of material deprivation that simultaneously signifies poor single women as moral pariahs and offers benevolent assistance in their transformation. “There’s no question this is a *tough-love* bill,”

Rep. Jennifer Dunn, R-Wash, told *USA Today*. “But we're trying to *give women an extra hand to get back into the job market.*” “Tough-love” is an exemplary neoliberal paternalist-New Right signifier for welfare reform: the policy is neoliberal in that it entails “tough” measures to discipline women so that they will be positioned to succeed as atomistic competitive economic actors (in the “job market”), while the significations of compassion and assistance achieved by the invocation of “love” activate moralistic and religious associations. Dunn’s colleague, Rep. Helen Chenoweth, R-Idaho, claimed that under the pre-reform system, “we put people in *bondage* with nothing more to look forward to than *a handout.*” Thus, conservative reform will free women from enslavement by the liberal state’s cultivation of the comfortable expectation of monthly checks. Rep. Linda Smith, R-Wash, justifies the legislation with language that evokes a kind of benevolent brutality: “This bill *roughs* (women) *up* a little bit, but *helps them along the way,*” she said. Again, poor women are signified as children in need of harsh discipline for their own good. The news story notes that GOP women were trying to soften parts of their party’s welfare agenda by restoring cuts in child-care funding, but as a whole the concepts their discourse activates cut against any moderating influences.<sup>57</sup>

### C. Racial Codes: From “Speciation” to the Million-Man March

As I noted in Chapters 2 and 6, explicit rhetorics of racial animus became less acceptable in institutional political discourse as the neoliberal era proceeded. However, one of the keys to the New Right hegemony has been to transform an earlier, more explicitly racist discourse into a set of coded appeals that legitimated conservative policies not only in race relations more narrowly defined, but in social welfare and economic affairs. Because of the much more racially diverse and socially progressive base of the national Democratic

<sup>57</sup> “GOP Women Take Up Welfare Cause: Amendments Are Offered On 'Tough-Love' Bill.” (March 23, 1995)

Party in the contemporary era, New Democrat discourse was less reliant on such appeals. But these voices contributed in some measure to articulations of individual moral depravity, cultural breakdown, gender, race and neoliberal welfare policy through more subtle representations. Moreover, my analysis of mainstream media coverage indicates that Clinton administration sources never directly challenged the New Right's appeals to race. Because race and welfare policy have been linked in American consciousness for decades, even nuanced media images and elite significations might reinforce anti-welfare attitudes among large segments of the mass public.

Robert Rector of the Heritage Foundation argued that the rise in unwed pregnancy among African Americans signaled a creeping pathology bred by welfare and a decadent culture of sexual permissiveness: “The *white family* is now *teetering on the same precipice*, heading rapidly toward the same *lethal decomposition* that *devastated black communities* in the late 1960s and 1970s,” he wrote.<sup>58</sup> In a later piece, he proclaimed that “the *liberal welfare state* has *carpet-bombed* the *moral foundations* of the *inner city*.”<sup>59</sup> These formulations imagine the social degradations of black communities — by the 1990s, white flight had served to make “inner city” a signifier for African-American neighborhoods — as rooted in a sexual immorality encouraged by a generous (and, implicitly, corrupt) welfare system. This rhetoric obscures the role of deindustrialization and economic disinvestment in creating conditions that encourage social breakdown, as corporations left urban areas (particularly in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions) seeking better “business climates” in the South and West, and then in other countries: it is the “moral” — not the economic — “foundations” that the “liberal state” has destroyed. Moreover, “carpet bombing” specifically activates images of villages populated by non-whites being destroyed indiscriminately and impersonally: even as left-liberals and the

<sup>58</sup> “Welfare Reform and the Death of Marriage.” (February 22, 1996)

<sup>59</sup> “Really Stand for Children: Fix Welfare.” (June 6, 1996)

“counterculture” had (falsely, in the New Right code) accused the U.S. military of carpet-bombing, so have these former anti-Vietnam war protesters (implicitly, affluent whites) — now comfortably ensconced in the bureaucratic enclaves of the “welfare industry” — done the same to the dark-skinned residents they claim to have concern for.

While New Democrat discourse did attend somewhat more closely to the economic or systemic factors that affect the social conditions of African-American communities, at least in the context of the welfare debate these voices focused much more on individualistic and cultural significations that played into the New Right narrative. During Clinton’s much-cited speech on race relations, delivered in Austin on October 16, 1995, the president proclaimed: “if we can spread *the benefits of education* and *free enterprise* to those who have been denied them too long and who are isolated in enclaves in this country, then we have a moral obligation to do it.” Here, the president articulates the bleak condition of African-American communities with his policies for increased education funding.<sup>60</sup> But he also constructs the problems of black neighborhoods as flowing from insufficient “free enterprise:” presumably, it is high tax rates and onerous regulations that have kept companies from investing in heavily minority urban areas. Indeed, one of Clinton’s signature economic proposals was for so-called “enterprise zones,” which would provide tax breaks and “regulatory relief” for firms that locate in depressed areas.

Much of the rest of this speech signifies the problems of African Americans as primarily cultural and personal: “Without *changes in the black community* and *within individuals*, real change for our society will not come,” Clinton said. The president’s words ring clearly in the dominant New Right code when he opines that “it’s not racist for whites to assert that *the culture of welfare dependency, out-of-wedlock pregnancy* and *absent fatherhood* cannot be broken by

<sup>60</sup> As seen in his proposal for privately run charter schools during the 1994 State of the Union address, Clinton’s education policies themselves were at least partially in the ideological orbit of neoliberalism.



social programs unless there is first more *personal responsibility*.” And while Clinton condemns Louis Farrakhan’s rhetoric (without naming the Nation of Islam leader), he depicts favorably the Million Man March that was under way that day in Washington, D.C.: “It is also about *black men taking renewed responsibility for themselves, their families, and their communities*. It’s about *saying no to crime and drugs*...One million *men* are right to be standing up for *personal responsibility*.”

These representations suggest that while the anti-white racism and racial separatism signified by Farrakhan are unacceptable, the march’s focus on self-help, moral uplift and the reassertion of a measure of patriarchy are a welcome corrective to outdated notions (embraced by mainline and left-radical civil rights groups alike) that stress the need for a national policy of social investment in African-American and poor communities: by articulating the sign of “welfare dependency” with sexual hedonism (“out-of-wedlock births”) and social disorder (“crime and drugs”), the president is speaking very clearly in the code elaborated by his ostensible political enemies. Clinton’s discourse suggests that social chaos, moral degradation and reliance on welfare stem from black men’s failure to “take responsibility for themselves, their families, and their communities” (they must “renew” these commitments). Ultimately, these significations operate ideologically to justify the significant withdrawal of state social support and the reassertion of market norms — and business power — entailed by the neoliberal policy regime.

The bipartisan reach of racially charged presuppositions in neoliberal welfare discourse is evident in the role of New York Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan in the debate that led to PRWORA. As I noted in the last chapter, Moynihan’s 1965 report on the decline of the black family opened a space for increasingly strident New Right attacks on social programs. The late senator holds a curious and contradictory place in the welfare reform

debates: in public forums, conservative political elites often vehemently challenged Moynihan's positions as representative of a left-liberal "old guard" that valorized expensive, top-down, bureaucratic and socially counterproductive policy strategies. And, as I also noted in Chapter 6, mainstream media coverage generally depicted the senator in a similar fashion, painting him as Clinton's most vociferous critic from the left on welfare reform. However, in more secluded communicative forums conservative intellectuals and policy experts explicitly drew on Moynihan's ideas. Heritage's Robert Rector went so far as to praise the former Johnson administration official's "prophetic warnings" about the "tangle of pathologies" in the black family, which Rector worried was now spreading to the white majority.<sup>61</sup>

News outlets' frequent recourse to Moynihan as a left critic of welfare reform is odd for a number of reasons beyond the historic importance of the 1965 report in moving discourse and policy to the right. First, by most accounts he never played a prominent legislative role in the debates that led to PRWORA: relying on the views of congressional staffers, Heilbrunn (1997) noted Moynihan's "passivity on the welfare reform bill." Moreover, Heilbrunn (1997) argues, Moynihan's ideological commitments were never very clear. He went from being "a member of the working group that conceived the War on Poverty" to "a centrist Democrat and critic of Great Society welfarism long before the Democratic Leadership Council patented the idea." However, after 1980 "Moynihan reversed himself. He...again, became a defender of social programs, decrying the administration's cuts in the social safety net that were being led by his former Harvard protégé David Stockman. Moynihan was an early critic of supply-side economics."<sup>62</sup> (ibid)

And while news media depicted the senator as a principled (if somewhat quixotic) left-liberal

<sup>61</sup> "Welfare Reform and the Death of Marriage." (February 22, 1996)

<sup>62</sup> These shifts seem to have been part of a long-running pattern. During the 1950s, Moynihan wrote for a "Cold War liberal magazine called the *Reporter*" edited by New Right intellectual godfather Irving Kristol. And, "running for the Senate in 1976, Moynihan depicted his Democratic primary opponent Bella Abzug as incapable of standing up for American values." (Heilbrunn 1997).

dissenter to the neoliberal welfare reform agenda — “We shall have a social calamity. We shall have millions of children, not just destitute, but desperate,” he told *NBC Nightly News* on September 19, 1995 — as late as 1994 he told a Senate hearing that the alarming rise in out-of-wedlock births “marked such a change in the human condition that biologists could talk of ‘speciation’ — the creation of a new species.” (Purdum 1994) Still, asked about Moynihan’s opposition after he signed the bill, even Clinton labeled the senator “a powerful and cogent critic of this move.” Heilbrunn (1997) interprets these apparent ideological contradictions to the senator’s keen sense for identifying shifting ideological climates and taking positions just ahead of the curve, along with his personality as an intellectual gadfly and a contrarian. But his place in the welfare reform debate also illustrates the gravitational pull of the right turn in U.S. domestic policy, particularly in the context of means-tested social programs: by the 1990s, even a considerably weakened AFDC program was a target for neoliberal-paternalist reorientation under a Democratic president, and the harshness of this move was too much even for Moynihan, who three decades earlier laid many of its foundations.

As I explained in Chapter 6, the racial dimensions of welfare reform were never covered explicitly by either network TV news or *USA Today* during 1995 and 1996. However, racially coded discourse and racial images were fairly prominent, particularly on television. For instance, all of the mothers (as well as the minister) quoted or depicted in the CBS News story on religion and welfare in Mississippi were African American. And in a January 12, 1995, story *ABC Nightly News* replayed footage from 1981 showing Reagan telling his infamous “welfare queen” tale: “Then we turn up a woman in Chicago as getting checks under 127 different names,” viewers see the president intoning to a group of (exclusively white) well-dressed luncheon guests.

Imagery in a companion segment to this report illustrate the kinds of racially charged anti-welfare articulations that media coverage may have activated in audience consciousness. The report opens with a shot of several African-American homeless people sleeping outside, followed by a close-up of food stamp coupons on a counter, with a pair of black hands counting them out, as correspondent Rebecca Chase says, “at the heart of the House Republican plan is a belief that much of what is wrong with America begins with welfare.” After showing a white baby in a stroller in a waiting room, the camera turns to a jarring image of dark-skinned men chasing each other and firing gunshots outside a convenience store. The viewer then sees Gingrich sitting in an office with an American flag behind him, as he proclaims: “The current welfare system is turning children into *young animals*, and they are killing each other. There’s a level of *barbarism* in this society we wouldn’t have dreamed of when we were children.” Chase interjects that “clearly, Speaker Gingrich’s evidence is frequently drawn from the most extreme cases,” before the viewer gets quick glimpses of police carrying black children from a tenement at night, a young African-American man with a flat-top haircut and oversized New York Giants jacket selling drugs to another black man on a street-corner in broad daylight, black babies crying, and finally a black child in a coffin with a stuffed animal. Gingrich appears again: “When our critics defend the old order, they refuse to accept responsibility for the drug addiction, they refuse to accept responsibility for the child abuse, they refuse to accept responsibility for the 11-year-old buried with his teddy bear.” Later in the story, as Chase describes the GOP proposal to forever deny aid to children whose fathers have not been identified, the viewer sees images of a white man and woman with a white toddler in a park, followed by a black woman walking a black toddler down a snowy urban street.

These sequences signify welfare as causing “barbaric” violence and crime in non-white men (Gingrich’s “young animals”), and while the correspondent does assert that the House speaker’s characterization is based on “the most extreme cases,” the video footage that follows this statement clearly signifies these “most extreme cases” as all involving non-whites (apparently abused or neglected children being rescued from a housing project, men exchanging cash for illegal drugs, a crying baby and a child in a coffin). Gingrich then gets a platform to articulate the “old order” of irrational government generosity and permissiveness with these signs of social pathology and personal tragedy. In the section on the paternafare program, marital monogamy (as cultural normativity) is clearly articulated with white families, while single motherhood (as moral irresponsibility) is associated with black families.

Of the 22 separate camera shots in this report in which people are explicitly or implicitly depicted as poor or on welfare, 13 — or 59.1 percent — show non-whites. While I do not suggest that news coverage should aim for an ideal of numerically perfect demographic representativeness, it is instructive that at the time of the broadcast 38 percent of AFDC recipients were white and 37 percent were black. This kind of imagery, combined with the fact that concrete information on the racial breakdown of the AFDC rolls was sparsely reported in mainstream news (as I noted in Chapter 6, such statistics appeared just three times over 20 months of coverage), suggest that the deeply rooted psychological associations between welfare and African Americans that have been empirically demonstrated by other researchers were probably solidified during the debate that led to PRWORA. Certainly, there is little reason to believe that either mass media coverage as a

whole or the discourse of high-profile elites (Republican and Democratic) played a role in *challenging* these perceptions.<sup>63</sup>

#### **D. Neoliberal Paternalism as Ideological Practice**

Overall, then, “welfare-to-work” discourse constructed low-income (particularly black) single mothers as morally suspect, culturally backward and pathologically dependent, and thus in need of the sort of intrusive disciplinary measures that neoliberal-paternalist policy offers. As Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]) argue, historically state officials have instituted a wide variety of economic, political and cultural mechanisms to deliver the poor to employers on favorable terms. Neoliberal welfare reform is the latest — and, in the modern American context, the most profound — manifestation of this trend. PRWORA entailed a number of devices, including strict time limits, various kinds of work requirements, and mandated training, job-search, “job-readiness” and “education” programs that policymakers claimed would empower the poor with the skills necessary to prosper in the dynamic neoliberal market. Thus, in apparent contradiction both to the neoliberal-New Right’s broad ideological self-construction as either deeply suspicious of or fiercely opposed to state power and government control, and to welfare reformers’ insistence (amplified by mass media) that pre-reform public assistance enslaved people in comfort and ease — and thus, that the new regime would “free” them — policymakers in 1996 embarked an ambitious experiment in social engineering that redirected the state apparatus to remake the poor as subjects of market imperatives.

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<sup>63</sup> Welfare-rights activists attempted to counter these racialized articulations, but again, they were largely ignored by mainstream media: Honkala joked that her home state of Pennsylvania consisted of “Pittsburgh and Philadelphia, and Alabama in between... The majority of folks who are poor and on public assistance in Pennsylvania are white. We’ve seen the manipulation that the media has used to make the issue urban and black. So we’re playing our role trying to decode that.” (Potash and Carpenter 1997)

As Stone (2007: 186) put it concisely, “in this era of conservative moral revival, government has consciously defined its role as less the aid dispenser and more the moral tutor.” It is as if the liberty and freedom that are the birthrights of “producers” must be denied to “unproductive” social elements until they can be remade into acceptable market participants:

Civic incorporation is pursued today by positioning welfare recipients, not as bearers of rights or participants in their own governance, but as targets of directive and supervisory administrative arrangements that require compliance...Uses of public policy to make ‘better citizens’ become, in this logic, indistinguishable from efforts to produce docile subjects who comply with market imperatives and political authorities. (Soss et al. 2009: 21-22)

As Soss et al. (2009) argue — and as the Hoover Institution’s call for replacing ideologically biased public social workers with staff trained in the private sector suggests — these efforts have included a drive to create a “new kind of bureaucrat” who will be even less forgiving of the personal failures of welfare recipients that constitute barriers to private wage work (on employer-friendly terms): “Caseworkers have been renamed with titles such as *financial planner*, *employment specialist*, or in some places, double-duty financial and employment planner.” (Stone 2007: 191; emphasis added)

Wisconsin official Jason Turner noted the “shocking success” of his state’s intake meetings in steering people from welfare, after which 28 percent to 50 percent chose not to apply: “Interviews indicate that many AFDC applicants like the idea that *someone is helping them decide to do what they knew was right all along*. The point here is that many *trapped inside the system* are looking for some kind of *moral guidance*.” This discourse suggests that it is the firm yet benevolent tutelage of the neoliberal bureaucrat that steers the wayward poor to the better personal choices that free them from the grip of welfare. But despite a rhetoric that signifies the spiritual awakening and material prosperity that flows from resourceful participation in the dynamism and opportunity provided by markets, the “welfare-to-work”

experience is often much less glamorous for participants. At least one local welfare office produced a brochure that advised recipients to stretch their budgets by searching landfills and dumpsters for edible waste (ibid: 192) And Stone (2007: 193) writes that “in Chicago, the young mother of an infant named Jessilean sought her caseworker’s help when she had no money to buy formula. The caseworker suggested she fast.” Such episodes suggest that the chief purpose of these financial planning efforts is to redirect women from social benefits — ideally into wage work or marriage to a male breadwinner, but often into some combination of private charity, assistance from relatives and deprivation.

Under the “work-first” philosophy, states and localities have created a massive infrastructure of mandatory programs based centrally on the logic that — because they are not “workers” — welfare recipients must be economically coerced and culturally indoctrinated into market-friendly behaviors and attitudes. Combined with benefit cuts, time limits and increasing administrative hurdles, these programs — earlier, less intrusive and coercive versions of which Piven and Cloward (1993 [1971]: Ch. 11) depict as part of a “dramaturgy” entailing “ritualized degradation” of lower-status constituencies — operate to solidify and promote business power by fraying the social safety net that operates as a floor under workers’ living conditions: as Stone (2007: 191, 192) writes, “welfare reform has created a strange world of Orwellian euphemisms and Potemkin workshops whose purpose is to baptize people as workers... Welfare clients are offered courses in good manners and behavior, masquerading behind high-flying titles like Milwaukee’s ‘Academy of Excellence.’” These programs include “tutoring in the rudiments of grooming, such as ‘Don’t go in there with body odor on you.’”



#### **IV. Mass Media Prisms: Popular Consensus and Elite Democracy**

My analyses indicate that news coverage of welfare facilitated hegemonic interpretations and policy agendas not only through a largely uncritical circulation of substantive neoliberal-New Right articulations, but also by presenting stories that signified the reform project as democratically legitimate. This was achieved along two interrelated dimensions: 1) reporting and interpreting public opinion poll results and interviews with ordinary citizens (including, crucially, aid recipients themselves) in ways that reinforced the right-wing populist notion that mass publics demanded neoliberal reform. 2) depicting the welfare debate as a spectacle of strategic and tactical conflict among prominent governing elites, thus symbolically writing popular political agency out of the policymaking process while refracting a tight neoliberal consensus into a bitter debate between right (represented by the GOP Congress) and left (represented by the Clinton administration).

##### **A. The People Speak: Citizen Interviews and Opinion Polls**

As I suggested in the last chapter, despite their numerical infrequency in mainstream news coverage, the voices of ordinary citizens — especially aid recipients themselves — played an important role in the ideological legitimation of welfare reform. My evidence indicates that on the few occasions when mass media presented audiences with the voices of non-elites (whether in direct quotes or indirect paraphrases), these citizens overwhelmingly expressed right-leaning perspectives on welfare policy. Such presentations were buttressed by the views of welfare mothers themselves: with few exceptions, recipients who appeared in the news propagated messages in support of neoliberal reform. At the same time, media were complicit in the efforts of elites — especially President Clinton himself — to act as vessels for pro-reform discourse that they attributed to recipients. These depictions of broad

popular consensus were reinforced by news outlets' partial interpretations of public opinion polls.

A January 12, 1995, *ABC World News Tonight* report sets the stage for the start of congressional hearings on the GOP welfare plan by using interviews with ordinary citizens and poll results to depict a near-total popular agreement in favor of neoliberal reform. Anchor Peter Jennings begins the story by telling viewers, “an ABC News poll on welfare which we have just completed indicates that there is a lot of support out there in the country for change.” The camera then cuts to the outside of a broken-down trailer, and Jennings says, “a vast majority of those we polled believe that parents of children who are poor *must do more to help themselves*...In many cases, widespread sympathy for those in need has given way to resentment.”

ABC backs up these assertions by turning to quotes from ordinary citizens: “Why should we have to pay for you to *sit at home, watch your soap operas and not go out and try to get something for yourself?*” a woman asks, reflecting gendered articulations of aid recipients as “not-workers” who need to take “personality responsibility” and enter the competitive wage-labor market. A man in a hardware store reinforces the dominant narrative positing the prevalence of generational cycles of pathological dependency, asserting that “there’s people who are *on welfare all their lives*, they have children, and *their children are on welfare all their lives*.” Viewers then see the results of a survey indicating that 72 percent of Americans believe that the welfare system is not “working well,” compared to 25 percent who disagree. These story elements combine to support the premise — grounded in individualistic notions of the (especially, female) poor as morally culpable — that the main problem with AFDC is long-term abject dependency, as well as the idea that there is a strong popular consensus behind such interpretations: the viewer is likely to read the poll results as meaning that all 72 percent

believe that welfare is “not working well” *because* benefits are too high and eligibility standards are too loose.

Later in the report, the camera turns to a clip of then-Vice President Dan Quayle at a 1992 campaign event. Surrounded by flags and red, white and blue balloons, Quayle proclaims: “We cannot be embarrassed out of our belief that two parents, married to each other, are better in most cases than one, that *honest work* is better than *handouts* or *crime*.” Viewers then see a crowd on a bustling city street, and Jennings proclaims, “we see precisely that attitude reflected in our poll today” as data appear showing 89 percent of Americans agreeing that aid recipients should be limited to two consecutive years of benefits, compared to 9 percent who disagree. Again, the stark dichotomy between “welfare” and “work” that has been constructed by bipartisan elite rhetoric is articulated with the views of ordinary citizens: perhaps most people would agree that “honest work” is better than “handouts” or “crime,” but the placement of these signifiers suggest “precisely” that welfare recipients prefer to collect benefits while profiting through violence and social disorder, and that the way to address this problem is to coerce the poor into low-wage labor markets by limiting aid.<sup>64</sup>

Similarly, in a special *ABC: Nightline* report broadcast the evening that Clinton announced he would sign PRWORA, the producers turn to “Wilbur’s BBQ” in Goldsboro, NC, to gauge citizen attitudes toward the new policy regime. Not surprisingly, anchor Chris Wallace tells us that “an unscientific sample of opinion suggests strong support for strict time limits on welfare recipients.” An anonymous woman tells viewers, “if they are used to *not doing anything*, it just *continues to breed* and *their children learn that*, and they need to *get a job*, *support themselves*, *support their kids so we*, the rest of the public, *are not doing that*.” In addition to

<sup>64</sup> ABC devoted just three of 18 total minutes in its three-segment story package on welfare reform that evening to a report designed to depict, in the network’s words, “Another Side” of the debate.

evoking the racialized specter of “speciation” that Moynihan raised alarms about two years earlier (connotatively, “breed” evokes animalistic reproductive impulses), this quote signifies the implicit *political* separation of welfare recipients (“*they* are used to not doing anything”) from “workers” (“*we*” support them): the lines of social antagonism are clearly drawn in implicitly racialized and gendered ways between “producers” and the “unproductive,” rather than between the majority of poor and working people suffering under neoliberalism and a small but powerful group of political-economic elites. All three of the people interviewed at the North Carolina restaurant expressed support for welfare reform.<sup>65</sup>

*USA Today* reinforced these notions in a story on opinion poll results. The report indicated that substantial public majorities favored cutting welfare, food stamps and public subsidies to the arts in order “to reduce the federal deficit.” However, the story did not inform readers that these programs take up very small proportions of the federal budget. Even the wording of the poll questions may have activated neoliberal-New Right notions by articulating programs for the poor (and the arts) with the widely reported specter of government debt. The survey also indicated that a majority favored cutting military spending (the buildup of which since 1980 has, in fact, played a large role in burgeoning deficits), but the news story failed to note that such cuts were not on the mainstream, bipartisan elite agenda. Instead, the story focused on poll results showing declining support for affirmative action policies, with most of the space devoted to the somewhat greater public endorsement of affirmative action programs for women, as compared to those for racial minorities. Even so, the report does not discuss an intriguing poll result indicating that Americans favored

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<sup>65</sup> I quote the third person in Section II-A.

affirmative action programs for poor people (regardless of race or gender) by a margin of 60 percent to 40 percent.<sup>66</sup>

Elite welfare reform advocates themselves also signified poll results in ways that supported neoliberal-New Right policy approaches. As Clinton said in his 1995 State of the Union address, “my fellow Americans, every single survey shows that *all the American people* care about this, without regard to party or race or region. So let this be the year we end welfare as we know it.” This passage articulates the ambiguous notion of “caring about” welfare programs (evidence for which may be drawn from frequent surveys that ask people to name the nation’s “most important problem”) with “ending welfare as we know it,” which signifies the bipartisan elite consensus of strict work requirements, time limits and paternalist behavioral-adjustment programs. Thus, the signifier “caring” (evoking notions of compassion) slips discursively into support for the pro-business design and harsh implementation of welfare programs that would later be condensed in PRWORA. Clinton’s construction defuses critical questioning of exactly what it means to “care” about welfare: perhaps the “caring” expressed by many citizens signifies for them policy changes that promise to reduce poverty and improve the conditions of poor women by liberalizing benefits and eligibility rules, and launching extensive support services and broad public-jobs programs that offer decent wages, benefits and workplace rights.

Dominant discourse in support of neoliberal welfare reform reserved a special place for the views of current and former aid recipients themselves. One of Clinton’s favorite rhetorical strategies was to proclaim welfare mothers’ collective endorsement of the measures contained in PRWORA, backed up by recycling the anecdote I reference in Section

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<sup>66</sup> “Affirmative Action Debate Skips Women.” (February 28, 1995) Jacobs and Shapiro (2000: 335) cite quantitatively derived evidence of news media’s misleading and superficial reporting of poll results during the 1990s.

III-B on the views that an Arkansas recipient expressed to a governors' convention several years earlier. Indeed, Lillie Harden spoke at the signing ceremony for PRWORA, where Clinton endorsed the bill sitting at a desk in the White House Rose Garden surrounding by her, two other African-American women who were once on welfare — “they, too, have *worked their way from welfare to independence* and we're honored to have them here,” the president said of Penelope Howard and Janet Harrell. “I thank you for the power of your example for your family and for all of America” — Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala, and a bipartisan group of (middle-aged and older, white, male) governors.

Clinton frequently deployed his time as Arkansas governor to signify a kind of street credibility for his views on welfare reform. During the 1994 State of the Union address, he referred to this experience before telling the nation: “And I want to say something to everybody here who cares about this issue. The people who most want to change this system are the people who are dependent on it. They want to *get off* welfare; they want to *go back to work*; they want to *do right* by their kids.” During the same speech, the president relayed the anecdote about Harden and followed up by proclaiming that “these people want a *better system* and we ought to give it to them.” He repeated the story in the same forum the following year, saying “no one is more eager to end welfare...The people who are *trapped* on it know it doesn't work. They also want to *get off*.” During his March 1995 address to the National Association of Counties, when the president spoke of Harden's inspiring journey from “laying up and watching the soaps” to setting a proud example for her son by working for wages, he told local officials: “I have spent countless hours in welfare offices, talking to caseworkers, talking to people on welfare...And nobody wants to get off the welfare system, I can tell you, any more than the people who are on it.” Clinton's discourse here signifies welfare recipients as knowing yet helpless victims of a liberal state that encourages laziness

and immorality (“do right by their kids”). Again, the government is operating like a narcotic (they are “trapped” in “the system” and “want to get off”). In addition to activating social dependency considerations in the neoliberal-New Right code, this rhetoric may prime psychological associations between public benefits recipients and illegal drugs.

Clinton claimed during his 1996 re-nomination acceptance speech that on his train ride to the convention he “met an *ingenious businesswoman* who was once *on welfare*.” These significations resemble Gingrich’s fully articulated “Vision of 2000,” in which “people who want to get *off of welfare* and *out of poverty* have found it surprisingly easy to open their *small business* and that they actually have a *tax code* and a *regulatory code* that is encouraging them to be *productive*...Then we can say this *revolution* has succeeded.”<sup>67</sup> In these formulations, public social provision and private market activity are signified as existential opposites: Clinton’s anonymous businesswoman is someone who made the full neoliberal leap from (dull) dependency to (“ingenious”) entrepreneurship. Gingrich further associates this entrepreneurship with policies whose “revolutionary” logics — if not their specific mechanisms and severe tilt toward the wealthy — Clinton would mostly endorse: the loosening or removal of business regulations and tax cuts to promote private markets.

Nearly every welfare recipient who was quoted in network TV coverage during 1995 and 1996 directly or indirectly supported neoliberal reform. CBS’s 1995 story on the “faith-based” “welfare-to-work” program in Mississippi included several camera shots of recipients engaged in program activities, but the only one who was interviewed praised the personalized nature of the “Faith and Families” initiative: “It wasn’t just you’re a number or something, it was Rhonda: what can I help you with?” Rhonda Aldridge told viewers. Her statement here echoes significations in New Right rhetoric that valorize the pre-New Deal

<sup>67</sup> “What Elections Mean to Conservatives.” (November 15, 1994)

era of (private, largely religiously based) social work, discussed in Section III-B. Similarly, the *Nightline* report featured a former recipient who had participated in an experimental program that anchor Chris Wallace said was “even tougher” than the new federal law. In this segment, viewers get a glimpse of the “work first” logo on a sign adorned with U.S. flags before being introduced to Stephanie Wiley — an African-American single mother of one who was on welfare for two years — with a close-up shot of her jail-guard uniform, followed by her colleague’s sheriff’s department patch. “It made me feel like I was still, you know, being *controlled*, and I don’t like to be *controlled*,” Wiley said of her time on welfare. “I’m more in control. I’d rather work and not have enough money, than be dished out an allotment saying, you know, here’s \$200, work with this.” In addition to activating notions of social benefit receipt as abject dependency, the significations achieved by articulating images of Wiley’s jail-guard job with the welfare-to-work program may subtly activate associations in popular common sense between public assistance and lack of discipline: she moved from dependence on a permissive welfare system to a new role as a paradigm of personal and social discipline.

*Nightline* does quote University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill professor Dennis Ortner, whose research tracked 45,000 welfare recipients over three years and found that just 20 percent remained employed for at least a year after leaving welfare. But Wallace downplays this single bit of critical perspective on the neoliberal-paternalist reform agenda by asserting, “still, the *strongest* endorsement of North Carolina’s program comes from Stephanie Wiley, *forced* off the welfare rolls.” Here, Wiley appears to thank reformers’ for their “tough-love” approach (she needed to be “forced off the rolls”). “If I can do it, then anybody can do it, and you have to *want it within yourself*,” she concludes. “I understand that, you know, people get into certain situations and circumstances that they cannot help, and yes



the government should help, but I only feel they should do it for, you know, a limited time, not *unlimited*.” Despite Wiley’s measured response in this final statement, viewers are left with the overall impression that personal failure is the main reason that people remain on welfare (after all, “anybody can do it” if they “want it within [themselves]”), that long-term dependency is a substantial problem and, consequently, that neoliberal-paternalist policy measures designed (somewhat paradoxically) to “force” people to be “free” are needed to address this problem.

A *USA Today* report from March 24, 1995, illustrates the curious nature of the processes through which mainstream media has channeled the views of those on welfare to American news audiences. Readers are told about Evonne Murray — one of the “precious few success stories” to “bubble up from the *welfare swamp*” — who went from “a government check” to “planning her move up the corporate ladder.” A bookkeeper at media and entertainment conglomerate Viacom, Murray credited her escape from AFDC to her enrollment in a privately run program called “America Works,” where “she got everything from *punctuality drills* and *lectures on not wearing low-cut clothes*, to computer training.” Murray contrasted the amotivational effect she had seen welfare have on others to the inspirational assistance she got from the work-readiness program: “I’ve seen it make too many people lazy. I didn’t want to be one of those people,” she said. “When you’re on public assistance, you lose a lot of self-esteem. At America Works, they’re not there to judge you.”

While this report does note the obstacles to placing AFDC mothers in wage employment and informs readers that full-time, year-round minimum-wage work does not lift a family of three out of poverty, it generally does not question the basic ideological premises on which neoliberal welfare reform is built. Moreover, its headline — “When Welfare Opens the Door: Success Stories Hard to Come By” — presents a paradox: while

such “success stories” may be “hard to come by” in the contemporary U.S. welfare system, mainstream TV and print media’s overwhelming focus on recipients (current and former) who credit their deliverance to neoliberal-paternalist reforms most likely suggested just the opposite to news audiences. Perhaps mass media’s deeply socialized preference for “the unusual” is partly responsible for these circumstances. But it seems likely that reporters’ overwhelming reliance on and deference to official sources and perspectives plays a large part as well. Even when journalists seek to craft stories presenting the perspectives of ordinary citizens, when it comes to populations like welfare recipients they are mostly led to these voices by political officials and welfare administrators with a distinct interest in presenting favorable impressions of reform. Moreover, certain subtle pressures may operate to shape the discourse that recipients present to reporters. As Blank-Libra (2004: 34) wrote in an analysis of regional newspaper coverage:

Recipients were undeniably placed in an awkward position as sources... To present themselves as antireform... was to risk presenting themselves as lacking a work ethic: why else would a recipient, someone defined as a dependent, not support legislation designed to lift people such as herself into lives of self-sufficiency and integrity?<sup>68</sup>

It should be no surprise that most recipients would never say they like being on AFDC (or TANF, for that matter): while benefits became somewhat larger and program requirements somewhat less stringent for a brief period after the 1960s, government assistance for the poor in the United States has never been generous, easy to obtain or culturally acceptable (Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]). But the statements by the vast majority of welfare recipients included in mainstream news coverage (and trotted out in elite

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<sup>68</sup> My own experience as a newspaper reporter confirms these possibilities: in a series on the local impact of PRWORA five years after it went into effect, the current and former recipients I interviewed were understandably reluctant to strongly criticize the welfare system. To be sure, most did not gloss over the material and social hardships of poverty and low-wage work. But, perhaps because of the need for ongoing or future relations with the welfare bureaucracy (and, in some cases, perhaps because of coaching by officials who helped set up the interviews), these recipients tended to avoid potentially controversial policy-relevant messages. In any case, my experience belies the Hoover Institution’s (1996) worry that liberal social workers and bureaucrats would try to undermine reform by steering journalists to “hardship cases” who would attribute their difficulties to PRWORA.

discourse) during the debate over PRWORA articulated this dislike with ideas that supported neoliberal-New Right policy goals. The single clear exception to the general pattern that I could identify is instructive. “I work but I just make ends meet,” an anonymous welfare recipient seeking sustenance at a Wisconsin soup kitchen told NBC News in a story aired on March 13, 1995. “I don’t get ahead, and *that’s the way they want to keep me.*” These statements suggest that it is not the de-motivational pressures and unhealthy or immoral lifestyle produced by “handouts” that makes welfare a nightmare. Rather, it is the stigmatizing and miserly nature of a program that (because of its imperatives to support business power and dominant political-economic arrangements) provides barely enough material resources for families to survive on while making applicants and recipients surmount onerous administrative hurdles and fulfill numerous demeaning and intrusive requirements. As the NWRO’s Cheri Honkala told a left-alternative magazine, “*we hate the welfare system* just as much as anybody in this country, if not more, because it’s a degrading, demoralizing system that *forces people to live below the federal poverty level.*” (Potash and Carpenter 1997)

## **B. Elitist Politics and the Official Spectacle of Welfare Debate**

Even as substantive news coverage depicted a near-total popular consensus in favor of welfare reform, media — somewhat paradoxically — presented mainstream political elites as in fierce conflict. These depictions, which were accomplished through a focus on political process, strategy and tactics, operated to obscure the official neoliberal consensus, and thus to legitimate PRWORA as the product of democratic contestation. This coverage combined with the signification of mass consensus under right-wing populist auspices to offer a spectacle of elite conflict that sidelined discussion of the concrete differences between New Right and New Democrat positions in favor of a superficial rhetoric of conflict.

Signs of this elite conflict were prominent in both print and TV coverage of welfare reform, but were most numerous — and, perhaps, most effective — in the latter. NBC chose the tag “Welfare Warfare” for its segment on the welfare discussion at the National Governors’ Association Conference in Burlington, VT. As anchor Brian Williams said, presidential candidates Dole and Clinton breezed through the city on July 31, 1995, “stopping just long enough to disagree on welfare reform.” The little substantive content in this story focused on how much authority over welfare standards and spending would be ceded to states and localities under the new regime. As I noted in the last chapter, the differences between New Democrat and New Right actors on this policy dimension were relatively minimal: both sides favored removing the federally mandated entitlement status of cash welfare and allowing lower levels of government to design various programs to move people from “welfare” to “work” — so long as these measures were no less harsh on benefits eligibility, work requirements and other neoliberal-paternalist approaches than national policymakers desired. But NBC’s signification of war-like partisan contestation obscured this basic consensus.

On January 8, 1995, ABC News broadcast a story focused on spending cuts in Medicare and Medicaid that the new Republican Congress included as part of its original welfare reform proposal. Anchor Carol Simpson introduced the segment by saying, “the battle lines over balancing the federal budget were drawn here in Washington today in a *verbal slugfest* that generated a great deal more heat than light.” While Democrats did oppose GOP attempts to drastically reduce spending for these health programs and turn over most authority for Medicaid to states, the story spends little time explaining the substance of these differences. Instead, the focus was on strategic angles and the dramatic and uncivil ways in which elites expressed their disagreements: the report replayed footage from NBC’s *Meet the*

*Press* in which Republican leader Dick Armey complains, “you walk out and then you find the president putting a pejorative spin on the meeting regarding who you are and what you stand for that has no connection with reality.” This story even shows journalists and political elites arguing about which of them was to blame for fostering a negative tone. Gingrich is shown, in reporter Sheila Kast’s words, “issu(ing) a warning to reporters:” “It would be nice for the national press corps to accurately report that it was a positive meeting, and not to rush off and immediately try to find some way to get a *cat fight* started,” the new speaker tells a throng of journalists. But Kast retorts that “the *players* were having no trouble starting their own *cat fights*.”

When the story finally proceeds to the substance of the “cat fights” that the “players” were engaging in, a careful reading makes it clear that Republicans and Democrats were arguing over which party was more committed to a basic neoliberal-New Right agenda. Kast introduces this section of the report by telling viewers that, “above all, both sides *slinging charges* about the budget.” But the clips of partisan battle on *This Week with David Brinkley* that follow this statement do not include a Democrat (or anyone else, for that matter) *defending* social spending: House Majority Whip Tom Delay lays down the gauntlet: “They don’t want a balanced budget; they want to preserve the *big government* that they’ve built over the last 40 years,” he said. Minority Whip David Bonior echoes Clinton’s neoliberal rhetoric by responding, “we’re the ones who cut 250,000 people off the government payroll, Tom.” To which Delay retorts: “So that you could use the money to spend it on other social programs.” But instead of offering a positive argument for such social programs, Bonior chooses to tout his party’s commitment to more spending on police and prisons: “So we could fight the crime issue.” Every source in this story is a political elite, and all the visual images are of familiar official backdrops, such as the Capitol building and

the set of Sunday morning chat shows. Most viewers likely came away with the impression that Republican and Democratic officials were incorrigible fighters, but that the only things worth fighting over were commitments to conservative programs: again, we see fierce official conflict masking a basic neoliberal consensus.

About three weeks later, *CBS Evening News* reported on a “*high-level* welfare reform *summit*” that President Clinton had convened. Correspondent Rita Braver begins by telling viewers that “the welfare *summit* was closed to reporters, but participants said the big news was that Republicans and Democrats...” The camera pans to a still shot of a large conference table covered with a handsome white tablecloth and ringed by Clinton and other officials (almost all of them white men), before viewers see conservative Democratic Sen. John Breaux of Louisiana at a podium, where he wryly completes Braver’s thought: “...were able to meet together in Washington in a closed room, and emerge after five hours still standing, smiling and relatively unharmed.” Braver interjects again: “Nevertheless...” The view turns to conservative Republican Senator Robert Packwood of Oregon, who says, “was there consensus? There was *surface consensus*. But when it comes down to the one issue we didn’t used to discuss 30 years ago you can see *the difference: flexibility*.”

Braver proceeds to offer an explanation of what “flexibility” means in the context of welfare policy, but the little substantive content in the story obscures the underlying bipartisan agreement in favor of “devolution.” Packwood signifies this agreement as a “surface consensus,” but in any case, viewers are exposed to little information or discourse that would help them decide for themselves, since the report never gets into exactly what divides Democrats and Republicans on this policy dimension. Still, the language in this story suggests that party leaders’ politeness toward each other is atypical — the “big news” was that they emerged from a five-hour meeting “still standing, smiling and relatively unharmed.”

But while their discourse may have been somewhat more civil than usual, the dominant reading of this news report would suggest that GOP and Democratic elites had deep substantive differences on welfare reform, even if the content of those differences appears fuzzy.

This story also exemplifies the intensely elite-inflected nature of the policy debate that resulted in PRWORA as it appeared in the mass media. Its subject was a “high-level welfare summit:” in the denotative code, the signifiers “high level” and “summit” are redundant, but in the connotative code this usage emphasizes the thoroughly official character of the issue. Viewers, then, are told of an official meeting (“summit”) at which (“high-level”) governing elites discuss decisions about a policy (“welfare”) that will affect millions of poor and working class people. But these lower-status constituencies are nowhere to be found in the report: again, every voice and every camera backdrop signifies officialdom. Edelman’s (1988: 97) statement applies with a particularly ironic force to an issue like welfare:

Stories evoking the high status of officials, their intricate negotiations with one another, their unique access to intelligence, and the privileges their offices confer on them are at the same time narratives about the exclusion of the rest of the population from that special world.

Presumably some of the leaders at the “summit” were elected to represent the interests of such citizens, but CBS viewers get no sense of how effectively they are doing so, since the report includes no discussion of how welfare reform might affect social and economic life.

To be clear, I do not suggest that there were no substantial differences between New Right and New Democrat positions on welfare reform: it mattered significantly to poor people’s lives that PRWORA did not mandate that benefits for teenaged single mothers and their children be immediately eliminated (as the GOP originally proposed), and that the policy contained more funding for day-care and other supportive services than the

Republican Congress preferred. However, the tone of vehement opposition often expressed by political elites on either side of the partisan divide — and, most importantly, its refraction through a mainstream media prism that amplified these conflicts while emphasizing political strategy and tactics over policy substance and sidelining non-official views — operated to obscure the basic neoliberal-paternalist premises that underlay welfare reform. Ultimately, most American news audiences received a picture of welfare reform that normalized elitist politics, narrowed substantive debate and may have dampened the political agency of popular constituencies.

#### **V. Discussion and Conclusion: Popular Consent In A (Nearly) Closed Discursive Environment**

My evidence in this chapter and the last indicates strongly that the discursive environment within which poll results on welfare reform germinated was heavily slanted in the direction of dominant interpretations. Mainstream media generally followed the lead of New Right-New Democrat voices that depicted the federal welfare state — and its “unproductive” beneficiaries — as the nemesis of hard-working ordinary Americans. Poverty was signified as primarily an individual phenomenon requiring moralistic approaches designed to introduce public assistance recipients to the wonders of wage work. These representations were further articulated with racially coded and gendered notions that operated to socially isolate the targets of welfare reform and politically divide lower-status groups. In all this, the political-economic dimensions of poverty — including the systemic forces that condition the life chances of “welfare” recipients and “workers” alike — were obscured in a project to enforce discipline in neoliberalizing labor markets. In addition to circulating these representations, mainstream media aided the conservative push for welfare reform by subtly signifying both a popular consensus in favor of the policy approaches that



were condensed in PRWORA and a superficial elite dissensus that gave the debate a sheen of democratic legitimation by depicting a spectacle of dramatic official conflict.

Welfare reform is a paradigm case of the dangers entailed in reifying public opinion. Many center-left policy experts and political elites were less than aggressive in countering New Right significations and in pushing for progressive approaches because doing so would not be “pragmatic” in light of what seemed to be an increasingly conservative “national mood.” But my evidence in this chapter and previous ones suggest that such “national moods” are political constructions that depend significantly on informational and communicative contexts that news coverage and elite discourse play a large role in shaping. As Piven (1996) writes in criticizing Clinton Health and Human Services Administration official David Ellwood for helping open the door to conservative attacks on welfare:

The Ellwood model leaves out too much. Public opinion is treated as firm and fixed, when in actuality it is ambiguous and shifting, and often susceptible to elite manipulation, especially on matters like welfare of which most people have little direct knowledge...And he touches only lightly on the antipathies toward welfare and the poor etched in American culture.

While mainstream news coverage did not entirely shut out policy opposition, it operated as neo-Gramscian theories of hegemony would predict by muting and channeling such critique in ways that minimized its potential impact in cracking the dominant picture of mass consent for the neoliberal turn. And media’s continued marginalization of non-official sources and popular movements that might offer stronger critiques and more fully articulated political alternatives made it increasingly likely that the rightward shift in economic and social welfare policy would benefit from a self-reinforcing process: business-friendly elites could appeal for democratic legitimation to signals of popular consent that their rhetoric and actions — as disseminated by a largely complicit news media — had played a large role in cultivating. These dynamics helped create a situation in which key indicators of economic and social

justice along could lose ground at an increasing pace even under a Democratic president: income and wealth inequality, downsizing, the loss of fringe benefits, the rise of temporary and part-time work for those who would prefer permanent, full-time employment, and social program cuts were all proceeding apace: as Miller (1996) put it, “the 1990s reveal just how entrenched and bipartisan are the dynamics of post-prosperity capitalism.”

Neoliberal-New Right attacks on the welfare and business regulatory state that saw their most spectacular success with PRWORA laid the policy and discursive grounds for further initiatives to target programs with larger and more politically assertive constituencies. Despite the solid support expressed in general public opinion polls for Social Security, Medicare, environmental regulations and the minimum wage, the failure to build broad political coalitions across lines of race, ethnicity, immigration status, gender and occupational level (i.e. “blue collar” vs. “white collar”) leaves these and other programs open to eventual dismantlement under the pressures of neoliberalization. By preparing the way for further right-wing initiatives, the attack on AFDC helped to reinforce and nurture a political climate favorable to neoliberalism. And the rhetorical division between “work” and “welfare” — so consistently amplified in media coverage — played an important role in creating a context in which public consent for neoliberal policy would likely be registered in opinion polls. Thus, “welfare” recipients and “workers” have generally failed to recognize common interests and shared fortunes to an extent sufficient to build a political force that could challenge — rather than simply delay or mitigate — the right turn in economic and social welfare policy: as Soss et al. (2009: 13) put it, “Americans were encouraged to think about changes in poverty governance as if they mattered only for deviant others, not for themselves. Yet this was far from the case.”

In some ways, the popular consensus and elite dissensus on welfare policy that mainstream media depicted may appear contradictory. However, on a broad ideological plane these vectors operated together: the apparently overwhelming mass support for the only version of welfare reform that was on the mainstream, official agenda provided a political space within which the news could fulfill its economically driven and professionally socialized imperatives to emphasize dramatic elite conflict and marginalize policy substance. It also provided a comfortable ideological blanket under which New Right and New Democrat leaders could perform their political pyrotechnics over policy dimensions that — while they mattered in some measure for the life chances of working people, poor women and their children — obscured a more significant and relentless push that threatened to make conditions much worse.

Hegemonic mass media does not operate according to a “conspiracy:” most mainstream news workers do their best to produce fair and accurate coverage, but these efforts occur within the ideological frameworks and under the institutional and structural pressures that their jobs. And because most newspaper readers and TV news watchers do not comprehensively follow and carefully analyze the reports they are exposed to, they typically do not actively parse messages from different stories to uncover latent contradictions: hegemonic media influence on the popular consent expressed in opinion polls operates according to a logic of association, where frames activate impressions in common sense that might be reconfigured if people were to engage consistently with alternative information or discourse. In my final empirical chapter, I use an experiment to preliminarily explore how such alternative configurations of political communication might shape concrete poll results.

## Chapter 8 -- Hegemonic News Coverage at the Ground Level:

### A Critical Experiment

#### I. Introduction

Before presenting a final chapter of empirical analysis, it may be worthwhile to review my findings and argument up to this point. The evidence drawn from news media coverage and political discourse that I have presented — collected and interpreted through both quantitative and qualitative methods — opens a window into understanding opinion polls on key U.S. economic and social welfare policies during the rise of the New Right. My findings also provide a strong basis for questioning the basis of popular democratic consent for these major shifts in state activities, which both reflected and encouraged a tremendous upward redistribution of material resources and political power during the neoliberal era.

Through comprehensive and detailed content analyses of mainstream media coverage during the 1981 Reagan tax and budget plan debate, and during the 1995-1996 welfare reform episode (Chapters 4 and 6), I demonstrated a strong tilt toward right-of-center sources and frames; a heavy reliance on official government sources rather than interest group, social movement and ordinary citizens' voices; and a tendency to stress procedural, strategic and tactical dimensions of politics, rather than substantive policy design and effects. Thus, in a manifestation of the negative dimension of ideological operations, the political communications system did not offer news audiences a diverse selection of policy perspectives grounded in divergent social visions. Media also presented politics as an elite-focused spectacle that obscured the concrete social implications of legislation — and thus, the connections between government and people's everyday lives — and that downplayed substantive issues and arguments about the direction of the U.S. political economy.

In qualitative analyses of emblematic political texts from these two episodes (Chapters 5 and 7), I critically deconstructed the messages circulated through such media coverage. Here, I showed how New Right actors and their sympathizers signified contested social visions and policy approaches in ways that made them appear natural and beneficial to popular constituencies. By situating this discourse in cultural and historical context, I demonstrated how — through processes of articulation (Hall 1985) manifesting the positive ideological register — conservative policy frames drew on and reformulated key strains of American common sense to support the neoliberal turn. I also offered evidence that culturally resonant potentially counter-hegemonic articulations were forged in marginalized corners of the public sphere, but that these messages received little or no mainstream news attention. Altogether, my findings (combined with what scholars have determined about the potential influence of news coverage on public opinion, and about the social forces and political interests that have animated the rightward turn) suggest strongly that — far from being inevitable or self-evident — popular consent for these policies was based in substantial part on a systematically distorted mass communications environment.

However, I have yet to offer empirical evidence that engages the individual-level causal mechanisms involved in these processes. The theoretical architecture that I present — focused on the connections between neo-Gramscian understandings of communicative power in hegemony and popular common sense, on the one hand, and the psychological processes of framing and priming, on the other — offers a plausible story of how mainstream media coverage might shape the expression of mass consent in public opinion polls. And my case studies of news content and political discourse during key policymaking episodes provides a fairly rich and rigorous empirical portrait of the messages that most Americans were exposed to as they registered backing for the neoliberal-New Right policy

agenda. But I have not put these pieces together and showed that such hegemonic news discourse can, indeed, play a role in causing people to express policy preferences and political perceptions that they otherwise would not. Such is the aim of this last empirical chapter, which presents results from an experiment I conducted in the wake of the GOP takeover of the House of Representatives in the 2010 election.

Here, I demonstrate that news stories very much like those that dominated the mass communications landscape during debate over the Reagan economic plan and over welfare reform can have the kinds of effects on poll results that I propose. My data show that when exposed to different versions of fictitious but realistic stories about an economic plan based on neoliberal-New Right principles, people generally respond through the mechanism of framing in ways that my theoretical perspective predicts: when they engaged with reports characterized by the dominant media narratives of conservative populism and elite spectacle, participants in my study — including, crucially, low- and middle-income people, and those who had earlier expressed strong values of socioeconomic egalitarianism — reported higher levels of support for the policy plan than they had before reading the report; higher levels of support than did people who read a more balanced portrayal featuring a wider array of sources and more left-leaning oppositional messages; and higher levels than did control-group participants who read an unrelated news story. For a number of reasons, these findings are provisional — but they are also substantial — as well as generally consistent with each other and with the larger theoretical and historical story that informs my analysis.

Experiments can be valuable tools for isolating some of the causal mechanisms that link macro-systemic phenomena such as mass media discourse to micro-individual phenomena grounded in human psychology and the particularities of social experience. Thus, working deliberately from my empirical analyses of the concrete historical shape of

mainstream news coverage during the neoliberal-New Right policy turn, this chapter explores how such discourse interacts with people's material circumstances and their pre-existing understandings about politics and society. While a critical realist epistemological-ontological perspective (Sayer 2010 [1984]) asserts that it is neither possible nor desirable to fully "control" for all the factors that influence social outcomes, the partial controls that an experiment can provide allow us to parse concrete evidence of media effects that other methods cannot capture. As such, this analysis can be a model for further development of research tools from different disciplinary traditions that link multiple levels of analysis to help scholars better understand the complex dynamics of media hegemony. But before turning to the evidence, I briefly explain the design of my experiment.<sup>1</sup>

## II. Experimental Design: Communicative Realism in a Classroom Setting

In order to examine the potential effects of hegemonic news coverage on mass policy opinion in the context of the neoliberal-New Right policy turn — and explore the psychological mechanisms that may underlie these ideological dynamics — I designed a randomized communications experiment. As described in more detail in the Appendix, I recruited 115 people from in and around Syracuse, NY, to spend approximately one hour in a campus classroom or conference room in several sessions during November and December 2010. In exchange for participation, each person was paid \$15 cash and offered non-alcoholic refreshments. In order to maximize external validity, I chose to forego the usual strategy of recruiting undergraduate students (Kam et al. 2007). Instead, I used employee email lists, fliers posted at campus and community buildings and bus stops, and word-of-mouth to draw participants who better approximated the typical audience for mainstream media coverage of public policy. Thus, my sample much more closely matched

<sup>1</sup> A discussion of the larger epistemological logic that undergirds the experiment is contained in Chapter 3. More detailed information on the sample and key variables — along with the complete survey instrument — is in the Appendix.

the population of respondents to the opinion polls in my policy case studies than would a selection of undergraduate university students.

I randomly assigned participants to one of three groups, each consisting of approximately 40 people: A) one group (N=37) read a realistic newspaper story about a fictitious neoliberal-New Right economic plan that was dominated by conservative-populist messages and official government sources, and that contained several messages focused on political procedure, strategy and tactics. In this condition, supportive policy frames outnumbered critical frames by a ratio of about three-to-one. I label this the “Strong Hegemonic” (SH) condition. B) one group (N=40) read a similar mock story on the same plan that featured a more diverse array of messages, in which supportive and oppositional frames were nearly evenly balanced, and which featured several left-leaning voices from outside official government circles. This story also included one substantial piece of information that was attributed to an ostensibly nonpartisan source (the Congressional Budget Office): the percentage of the proposed bill’s total cost that would go toward tax cuts for wealthy people and corporations, as opposed to tax cuts for low- and middle-income people and spending for programs that benefit them. I label this the “Weak Hegemonic” (WH) condition. C) one group (N=38) read a fictitious story on the rise in celebrity news interest and changing American movie tastes. This is the control condition. I summarize the key variations among the groups in Table 8-1. Details on the randomization procedure are in the Appendix; my post-experiment checks indicated that members of each group did not differ systematically from each other along most demographic or other potentially relevant dimensions.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> I checked for significant variations among the groups in sex, race, age, formal educational level, family income, party identification, ideological identification, levels of pre-existing general political knowledge and policy-specific knowledge, and levels of chronic political engagement. I found significant differences along three dimensions: members of the WH treatment group were younger and more highly educated than were members of the other groups, and members of the WH



Experiments can be powerful tools for identifying and specifying the outcomes of certain causal mechanisms in large part because of this randomization component: since differences among members of the groups — including, in my context, demographic characteristics relevant to news reception, as well as other factors that may be related to past experiences with variably hegemonic social practices — are due to chance, we can be fairly confident that observed changes in attitudes are the result of the communications treatments. This design greatly diminishes the possibility that some unobserved factor or set of factors — rather than the news stories themselves — produced observed opinion differences between the experimental groups.

I verbally provided basic instructions informing participants that they were taking part in a study on politics and the media, and that they would complete a two-part questionnaire that included reading a newspaper article.<sup>3</sup> The first part of the survey gathered demographic information, tested for general political knowledge and basic knowledge of economic and social welfare policy, and included questions tapping broad socioeconomic value-orientations. It featured three items that would serve as pre-test measures: 1) a question asking for participants' opinions on "the new economic plan being debated by politicians in Washington," 2) a question measuring internal political efficacy (i.e. the extent to which they feel competent to understand and navigate the political system), and 3) a question tapping external political efficacy (the extent to which they feel that policymakers take their views into account when making decisions).<sup>4</sup>

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group had lower levels of political engagement than did participants in the control group. But these variations should pose little problem for my analyses. While the differences are statistically significant, they are not substantively large. Moreover, from a theoretical perspective, the potential effects of these differences on news reception should work at cross-purposes: age and political engagement are positively correlated in the population at-large, while formal education is positively related to engagement.

<sup>3</sup> Upon completion, participants received a debriefing statement that explained the study's design and rationale.

<sup>4</sup> Because of the (intentional) generalized wording of the pre-test policy question, we cannot know for certain what object participants were thinking about when they offered their opinions on "the new economic plan being debated by politicians in Washington" before reading one of the news stories. At the time of the experiment, no particular economic policy plan

Members of each group then handed in the first part of the survey, and received the second part, which began with the news story they were assigned to read. These articles were closely modeled on *USA Today* reports that one might find on the paper's website. This extended not only to the substantive content, but also the style of the stories (including the length, and the font size and shape of headlines, reporter bylines and text). The treatment reports both pertained to an economic plan that Republican elites — with the support of conservative Democrats and the Obama administration — were proposing in the wake of their victory in the midterm congressional elections.<sup>5</sup> The plan was tilted toward cuts in income, estate and corporate taxes targeting high-income, wealthy and business constituencies, with a much smaller proportion devoted to initiatives that would benefit low- and middle-income people, including an expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, some extended unemployment benefits, and aid to cash-strapped state and local governments. With the exception of the key variations in ideological frame ratios, news source proportions, and substantive vs. procedural, strategic and tactical coverage (depicted in Table 8-1), content in the two treatment reports was identical. After reading the stories, participants answered the same policy preference and political efficacy items they answered in the first part of the survey. Immediately following the policy question, they also answered an open-ended “free thought-listing” question designed to elicit the top-of-the-head

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was under consideration, so most people were probably either relying on their impressions of the general content of recent debates, or were uncertain. The large number that answered “don't know” to the pre-test question suggests that many were unsure what was being asked about. While this should cause readers to interpret the results of my within-subjects analyses somewhat more cautiously than those from my between-subjects tests, it does not present a major problem for my argument: the opinions that people expressed in the pre-test probably were based on different attitude objects, but once they learned about the content of the policy plan by reading a news story, participants responded remarkably consistently based on my theoretical framework linking mainstream media discourse to pre-existing social, material and informational characteristics.

<sup>5</sup> See the Appendix for the text of the newspaper stories.

considerations (see Zaller 1992) — representing fragments of common sense — that participants relied on in answering the earlier item.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of experiment provides perhaps unparalleled analytic power for isolating and abstracting causal mechanisms involved in the processes by which hegemonic media discourse shapes mass policy opinions and political understandings. In addition to offering the benefits of random assignment, the experiment allowed for directly presenting people with news discourse in a relatively controlled environment: participants completed the survey and read the mock *USA Today* articles under roughly similar contextual conditions. This level of control — along with a design that combined aspects of both “within-subjects” experiments (in which the same participants provide data before and after a treatment) and “between-subjects” experiments (in which participants in different groups provide data after receiving different treatments) — confers distinct advantages in terms of internal validity for the precise examination of media effects.

However, my design also leverages external validity to a degree that is not typical in roughly comparable experiments testing the impact of communications frames. First, as I describe above, I employed a non-student sample consisting largely of non-faculty university staff members, their family members and friends, and community members who learned of the study at public bus stops and similar locales (or from acquaintances who had been informed of the project in such ways). While some scholars argue that undergraduate students and other people vary little on the psychological characteristics that interest most researchers, I do not believe that this is the case for my topic. My goal was to employ participants who approximated as closely as possible typical audiences for mainstream news

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<sup>6</sup> Each part of the questionnaire also included a few “filter questions” on sports and entertainment preferences, in order to reduce fatigue with answering political and public policy questions, and to induce greater realism in the context of news media exposure: since most people do not devote uninterrupted stretches of careful attention to reading and thinking about public affairs, researchers try not to create such conditions in a study like this.

discourse: while full demographic representativeness is neither possible nor necessary in this kind of experiment, I was able to minimize the chances that characteristics generally associated with these audiences (which might have relevance for media effects) would be under-represented in my sample. From a larger theoretical perspective, taking seriously the endogenous character of public opinion and political understandings — and the recursive nature of the mutual interactions between characteristics observed at the individual level (such as income) and contextual factors (such as news discourse and the forces that produce it) — requires empirical approaches that do not assume a similarity of effects across different groups of people: the amalgam of concrete influences that generate the “considerations” that make up popular common sense operate within and through patterned yet specific social contexts, so examining the interaction of news frames with these factors calls for research designs that are sensitive to such differences.

Finally, my communications treatments offer an unusual degree of realism compared to other experimental studies of framing in a political context. First, I used facsimiles of full-text news stories to investigate public opinion effects. Some studies instead present people with paragraphs (written in journalistic style or otherwise) offering certain issue frames or facts. This approach can be valuable for isolating the impacts of specific kinds of information, but results are typically less generalizable outside the experimental setting, since people almost always receive communications in a less sterilized and isolated manner (usually through news reports or face-to-face discussion, but also through interest group literature, government brochures and so on). Second, my news reports were based on roughly contemporaneous public debates (and they featured plausible rhetoric and behavior by major political actors) that participants may have been familiar with before the experiment. This not only increased internal validity by making the stories appear believable, but it added to

the contextual realism of the study by making the experience of reading them feel more familiar, thus better approximating the conditions under which public opinion effects occur in the larger world.

Last, and perhaps most importantly, I wrote the mock news stories to systematically mirror not only the details of journalistic style that characterize mainstream political media (in this case, *USA Today* coverage), but the content of actual policy debates as determined by the careful empirical investigation in my case studies: not only the numerical proportions of news voices and frames, but the substantive discursive architecture of the stories was grounded in the quantitative and qualitative analyses of the 1981 Reagan economic plan debate and the 1995-1996 welfare reform episode (presented in Chapters 4 through 7). My goals of seeking contextually bounded generalizations about the dynamics of mainstream media and mass opinion, and of helping to explain the rightward turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy that has accompanied neoliberalization, are inextricably tied together: adequately engaging the former set of issues requires attention to the patterned historical particularities of the latter. I turn now to my specific, theoretically derived empirical expectations for the experiment.

### **III. Working Hypotheses: Linking Macro-Level Media Discourse to Micro-Level Psychology**

My expectations for the results of this experiment were grounded in what we know about the effects of news media on public opinion, as I understand these findings in the context of neo-Gramscian approaches to power relations and mass political consciousness. My working hypotheses are organized here as follows: the first set (A1, A2, A3 and A4) concerns the overall dynamics of how media discourse carries hegemonic (or potentially counter-hegemonic) implications for mass opinion — in other words, the linkages between

people's material interests and values, the political messages they receive, and their expressed public policy preferences and political perceptions. The second set (B1 and B2) involves individual-level moderators of these communication processes — in other words, the pre-existing factors that may condition hegemonic effects on public opinion. The last category (C) centers on the mechanism by which I expect hegemonic or oppositional news discourse to operate on opinion, which is the priming of particular clusters of ideologically relevant considerations (or fragments of popular common sense) through the reception of information and communications frames.

**A) 1]** Treatment group participants (those assigned to A and B in Table 8-1) will exhibit higher levels of opinion expression, compared to the pre-test and compared to the post-test responses of control-group participants.

This expectation is based on research demonstrating that political communications in general (e.g., information and arguments) can cause people to register policy opinions when they otherwise would not express such preferences (Kinder 2003; Mettler and Guardino 2011). From some perspectives this is perhaps a trivial point, but I include it because it is important to continually stress the endogenous nature of poll results: in other words, the preferences — or lack thereof — that people express in surveys do not spring mysteriously from some apolitical or asocial realm; rather, the content of such results is crucially influenced (though often in complex and less than immediately intuitive ways) by the surrounding cultural — and thus, communicative-informational — context. Demonstrating that communications can spur opinion expression (particularly on complex policy issues) counters those who cling to older views based on the prevalence of so-called “non-attitudes,” which suggest that “don’t know” responses stem from reified patterns of ignorance, irrationality or lack of interest and motivation (e.g. Campbell et al. 1960; Converse

1964). From a larger conceptual perspective, showing the impact of communications on the propensity to offer policy preferences emphasizes both the power of news coverage to influence climates of opinion that support hegemonic power relations, and the capacity for popular political agency (especially among those of lower socioeconomic status) that can potentially challenge these relations: taking as unproblematic the existence of substantial numbers of people who fail to answer policy questions legitimates the notion that public affairs are inherently uninteresting or incomprehensible to mass constituencies, and thus should be left to politico-economic elites.<sup>7</sup> Despite the hegemonic uses to which surveys are often put (Lewis 2001; Jacobs 2005, 2011), even registering a preference in a poll is a form of political voice that ought not to be minimized, and it is important to emphasize that non-answers are not a fact of nature.

**A) 2]** Low- and middle-income participants assigned to the SH communications treatment (row A in Table 8-1 above) will become *more* supportive of the conservative economic initiative, compared to their initial preferences during the pre-test, and compared to the post-test preferences of low- and middle-income people in the control group (C in Table 8-1). Conversely, low- and middle-income participants assigned to the WH condition (B in Table 8-1) will become *less* supportive of the proposal.

**A) 3]** Self-identified liberals and Democrats — and participants I code as “highly egalitarian” based on their pre-test answers to the set of general value questions — who are assigned to the SH condition will become *more* supportive of the conservative economic initiative, compared to their initial preferences, and compared to the post-test preferences of similar

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<sup>7</sup> Empirical research shows that people with lower levels of income and formal education are more likely to offer “don’t know” responses to political and policy questions (Jacobs and Skocpol 2005: 217).

participants assigned to the control group. Conversely, liberals, Democrats and high egalitarians in the WH treatment will become *less* supportive.

These expectations are based on scholarship suggesting that people are more likely to express opinions that conform with their relatively stable (though not unchangeable), underlying predispositions — i.e. their economic class interests and/or social values — when they receive political information and messages that help them link public policy issues to these interests and values (e.g. Zaller 1992; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997). My logic suggests that the WH treatment will facilitate such a linking process for those predisposed in this sense to reject neoliberal-New Right policy ideas, while the SH treatment will subvert this process, leading to preferences that are produced by hegemonic influences that conceal or exclude such articulations.

**A) 4]** Participants assigned to the SH treatment condition (row A in Table 8-1 above) will report *lower* levels of political efficacy, compared to their initial responses during the pre-test, and compared to the post-test responses of those in the control group (C in Table 8-1). Conversely, people in the WH communications condition (B in Table 8-1) will register *higher* levels of political efficacy. These effects will be larger among low- and middle-income participants than among the sample as a whole.

This empirical expectation is founded on the proposition that news coverage stressing the procedural, strategic and tactical gambits of officials — rather than the substance of public policy and the concrete social implications of state activities — will tend to dampen both people's sense that they can understand and navigate policy issues and the political system (internal political efficacy), and their belief that government actors respond to the concerns of popular constituencies (external political efficacy). There is some support for an attitudinal dynamic of this sort in empirical communication research (e.g. Cappella



and Jamieson 1997), but my expectation here is more firmly grounded in theoretical writings on contemporary mass media as a “spectacle” that obscures the concrete social implications of government policy and de-emphasizes the value of popular political participation (Debord 2010 [1967]; Edelman 1988; Bourdieu 1998). I predict effects on *internal* efficacy based on the relative paucity of public policy information and substantive arguments in such coverage. I expect impacts on *external* efficacy because stories like the SH treatment (as well as a large number of the reports I analyzed in my historical case studies in Chapters 4 through 7) are heavily populated by elites propagating strategic, procedural and tactical messages seemingly concerned with personal and partisan advantage, rather than frames substantively linking their actions and ideas to the interests and values of ordinary citizens. I expect that these dynamics will be more pronounced among low- and middle-income participants because such constituencies are typically the most politically alienated in the contemporary historical context, perhaps increasingly so under the social and economic pressures of neoliberalization.

**B) 1]** Participants with higher levels of general political knowledge will exhibit *lower* magnitudes of policy opinion change *counter to* their core predispositions (see expectations A2 and A3 above) when they are exposed to the SH communications treatment (A in Table 8-1), than will people with lower levels of such knowledge who are exposed to the same treatment. Conversely, participants with higher levels of general political knowledge will exhibit *higher* magnitudes of opinion change *in the direction of* their core predispositions when they are exposed to the WH treatment.

**B) 2]** Participants with higher levels of issue- or policy-specific knowledge will exhibit *lower* magnitudes of policy opinion change *counter to* their predispositions when they are exposed to the SH treatment, than will those with lower levels of such knowledge. Conversely, those

with higher levels of issue- or policy-specific knowledge will exhibit *higher* magnitudes of opinion change *in the direction of* their predispositions when they are exposed to the WH communications treatment.

Thus, I suggest that the pre-treatment possession of factual information (both about general political institutions, processes and actors, and about the specific policy issue under discussion) will tend to *dampen* hegemonic ideological processes, instead *facilitating* potentially counter-hegemonic processes for those predisposed to reject conservative messages.

Previous research demonstrates the importance of both general political knowledge (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997) and policy-specific knowledge (e.g. Gilens 2001; Cook et al. 2010; Jerit et al. 2006) as species of contextual information that help people comprehend and process new political messages, and then link their underlying values and interests to sensible policy preferences. I expect that such knowledge will help people analyze communications, argue against messages that appear to contradict their interests and values, and understand and accept messages that comport with these predispositions. Since levels of political and policy knowledge are negatively correlated with socioeconomic status (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997), I suggest that the conditions that encourage knowledge limitations are one means by which hegemonic processes operate on subordinate groups in the contemporary United States.

**C)** Participants exposed to SH communications treatment (A in Table 8-1 above) will list relatively more thoughts that evoke economic individualism and capitalist market logics in response to the post-test open-ended considerations probe. Conversely, those exposed to the WH treatment (B in Table 8-1) — as well as participants in the control group — will list a more balanced array of ideas, including discourse related to economic egalitarianism and social welfare concerns.

This expectation is based on the idea that the mechanism through which media framing effects operate is the *priming* of considerations, or the capture and activation of socially resonant elements of popular common sense. As Zaller and Feldman (1992), Zaller (1992), Chong and Druckman (2007a, 2007b), and others argue — and as Antonio Gramsci and critical-cultural communication scholars influenced by his work suggest — most people hold a range of ambivalent and often conflicting considerations on public issues. It is by priming ideologically amenable and politically advantageous sets of considerations that communications frames can affect the expression of public opinion. In my experimental analysis I expect that these processes will be reflected in differences in responses to the free thought-listing item among subjects in the two treatment conditions and in the control group.

In keeping with a post-positivist epistemology grounded in critical realism, I understand these empirical expectations as *working* hypotheses. As such, they constitute tentative predictions for the results of my experiment, based on the theoretical and historical-empirical understandings I gleaned from existing scholarship and from my case study analyses. But as I discuss in Chapter 3, research is a recursive process that involves a continual dialogue between theoretical categories and specific empirical evidence, with the latter always holding the potential to spur reformulation of the former. Moreover, the generalizations that might emerge from findings of experiments like the one I present here are always to some degree bounded in time and space, defined by the historical conditions of the phenomena under analysis, by the unavoidable limitations of the methods employed, and by the fallibility of all knowledge claims. With these empirical expectations and their theoretical grounding in mind, I proceed to the results of my investigation into the effects of

mainstream news discourse on public opinion in the context of the neoliberal turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy.

#### **IV. Basic Results: Opinionation and Attitude Change: The Difference That News Discourse Makes**

On the aggregate level, exposing participants to newspaper stories about a neoliberal-New Right economic plan caused them to substantially increase their rates of opinion expression. Reading the reports also caused them to change their policy preferences in ways that are generally consistent with my theoretical expectations regarding the framing effects of hegemonic discourse. These findings provide promising initial support for the proposition that mainstream media coverage has affected the expression of popular consent for conservative reconfigurations of the welfare state over the last 30 years.

After being exposed to one of the two news treatments, 92.2 percent of participants expressed an opinion on the economic plan, compared to just 60.5 percent of those in the control group.<sup>8</sup> In addition, the rate of opinion expression among those who were exposed to one of the treatments nearly doubled from 46.8 percent before reading the news story ( $p < .05$ ).<sup>9</sup> I conducted a more stringent test of the relationship between media exposure and opinion expression by running a simple logistic regression model that estimated the effect of reading one of the news reports on the propensity to register a preference on the conservative economic plan. Controlling for pre-exposure opinionation, I found that being in one of the treatment groups had a large and statistically significant effect on the odds that participants would express an opinion after reading a story, as compared to those in the control group ( $p < .05$ ). These findings offer strong support for working hypothesis A1: it is

<sup>8</sup> The rate of opinion expression was essentially the same across treatment groups, with 91.9 percent reporting an opinion after reading the strong hegemonic story, and 92.5 percent expressing an opinion after reading the weak hegemonic version.  
<sup>9</sup> Again, these results are remarkably consistent across the two treatment conditions, with opinion expression increasing from 43.3 percent to 91.9 percent after reading the strong hegemonic report, and from 50 percent to 92.5 percent after reading the weak hegemonic story.

clear that engagement with media coverage causes people to express opinions on economic and social welfare policy issues when they otherwise would not.<sup>10</sup> This suggests that a considerable percentage of “don’t know” responses to public policy questions are due to limited exposure through news media to information and arguments about these issues that provide a plausible basis in which to ground opinion.

But does exposure to mainstream news discourse cause audiences to express opinions that are in line with the dominant policy framing and narratives that underlie that discourse? In other words, does reading a news story that is strongly reflective of the hegemonic tenor of mass media coverage on economic and social welfare policy prompt people to report opinions that are more supportive of conservative policies than those they would report if they were exposed to news reports that are more weakly reflective of the neoliberal-New Right hegemony? My initial evidence answers this question in the affirmative.

Looking first at the SH condition — which was dominated by sources and messages favorable to the neoliberal-New Right turn — we can see that news exposure caused larger increases in policy support than in policy opposition. As shown in Figure 8-1, favorable opinions in this condition increased by nearly 33 percentage points — from 21.6 percent to 54.1 percent ( $p < .05$ ) — while unfavorable opinions went up by about 16 points — from 21.6 percent to just 37.8 percent. In contrast, after reading a story that offered a more balanced array of sources and messages — including several that critiqued the class biases of the plan — participants in the weak hegemonic condition were much less likely to favor the conservative policy. Figure 8-2 shows that unfavorable opinions in this condition went up by

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<sup>10</sup> From a methodological perspective, these findings also serve as a basic “manipulation check” on my treatments: they show that study participants generally received the communications I presented them, rather than ignoring the news stories or becoming so confused as to be unable to register an opinion.

25 points — from 27.5 percent to 52.5 percent ( $p < .05$ ) — while favorable opinions increased by just 17.5 points — from 22.5 percent to 40 percent. Thus, a solid majority in the strong hegemonic condition favored the conservative policy proposal after reading the news story, while a solid majority in the WH condition opposed the plan after reading an alternative version of the report. Moreover, differences in post-exposure opinion for the two treatment groups as compared to the control group were consistent and in the expected direction: support in the strong hegemonic condition was 17.3 percentage points higher than in the control group, while opposition in the weak hegemonic treatment was 28.8 points higher than in the control group ( $p < .05$ ). And, as expected, the proportional pre- and post-exposure opinion distributions among those in the control group were virtually unchanged.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the aggregate it appears that engaging with mainstream media coverage that mirrors the hegemonic communications climate I demonstrate in my case studies can cause people to express economic and social welfare policy opinions in line with the neoliberal-New Right turn. In contrast, engaging with more ideologically diverse coverage can prompt more negative expressions of opinion. However, as I have argued throughout this study, the processes through which hegemonic news framing can affect opinion expression by priming elements of common sense are crucially moderated by audiences' individual and social characteristics. In other words, these dynamics involve a process of *articulation* whereby

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<sup>11</sup> Reading a story about celebrity news and movie preferences prompted little increase in the propensity for people to express an opinion on economic policy: "don't know" responses in the control condition went from 42.1 percent pre-exposure to 39.8 percent post-exposure.

I attempted a more precise test of the relationship between reading each of the news stories and post-exposure policy opinion by running an OLS regression model. Controlling for pre-exposure opinion, this analysis showed that being in the SH condition strongly increased post-exposure support for the neoliberal-New Right economic plan (coefficient = .276), and that being in the weak hegemonic group reduced policy support (-.108). However, neither of these effects reached levels of statistical significance. The p-value for the WH condition was .607, making that result highly unreliable. But the p-value for the SH treatment was .223, which (while it does not reach commonly accepted criteria) does indicate a more than 77 percent level of confidence. The lack of significance for the WH treatment does not undermine my argument, as in the aggregate I would not expect there to be a consistent relationship between reading this story and policy opinion. Regression results for the SH condition do, however, constitute tentative support for my predictions, given that they are in the expected direction, not wildly under the level of statistical significance, and consistent with evidence from my descriptive analyses.

media coverage forges connections among popular social understandings, material conditions, elements of discourse and policy issues, which interact to shape patterns of mass consent.

So, what do my experimental results look like when examined according to demographic and other predispositional characteristics that mark participants' material circumstances and broad value orientations? Especially, do even low- and middle-income people — those whose material conditions these conservative policies would harm the most — express support for such policies when they engage with hegemonic news discourse? And what about people of all income levels whose basic values are orientated toward a larger degree of socioeconomic egalitarianism? Do these people express opinions that contradict their social orientations — communicating support for policies that heavily favor high-income, wealthy and corporate constituencies, and promise to increase economic inequality — when they are exposed to hegemonic mainstream media coverage? It is to these questions that I turn next, beginning with opinion dynamics according to income.

## **V. Results by Income: Hegemonic News Discourse and Material Interests**

My results show that mainstream news discourse that mirrors the coverage patterns in my case studies of the historic policy episodes of 1981 and 1995-1996 can cause low- and middle-income people to express preferences that do not cohere with their proximate material interests: reported opinion among these participants was considerably more favorable toward a neoliberal-New Right policy initiative after reading the strong hegemonic version of the news story than before reading the report. Moreover, exposure to the WH story — which featured more oppositional discourse, including some potentially counter-hegemonic frames disseminated by the kinds of left-leaning nongovernmental sources that very rarely receive a mainstream media platform — caused low- and middle-income people

to turn strongly against the conservative proposal. These dynamics were particularly noticeable among the lowest-income participants. And distributions of post-exposure opinion among low- and middle-income people in the treatments and in the control group were consistent and in the expected directions — i.e., there was higher favorability for those in the SH condition compared to the control group, and higher opposition for participants in the WH condition than among those in the control.

As depicted in Figure 8-3, reported support for the policy proposal nearly doubled among low- and middle-income people after they were exposed to the strong hegemonic news story, increasing from 28.6 percent pre-treatment to 56.1 percent post-treatment ( $p < .05$ ). At the same time, opposition increased by just 9.5 points, from 23.8 percent to 33.3 percent. Thus, a large percentage of people whose immediate material circumstances would be significantly harmed by the neoliberal-New Right policy initiative described in the story nevertheless expressed support after receiving strongly hegemonic news discourse centered on the conservative-populist themes that have dominated mainstream media coverage of these issues in recent decades.

However, members of these same popular constituencies reacted to the policy proposal very differently after they encountered news coverage that offered a more ideologically diverse set of messages, more substantive policy content and a wider range of voices, including some critical sources from outside government circles. Figure 8-4 shows that opposition among low- and middle-income participants more than doubled after they were exposed to the WH treatment, increasing a full 30 points from 23.3 percent to 53.3 percent ( $p < .05$ ). Simultaneously, support among such participants in this condition increased just 13.3 points, from 26.7 percent to 40 percent. Thus, simply reading what appeared to be a *USA Today* story that was of similar style, format and length as the strong hegemonic story,



but which included a nearly even ratio of supportive to oppositional frames — along with a wider diversity of sources and some substantive information about the policy’s concrete benefits — prompted a virtually opposite distribution of preferences among low- and middle-income people.<sup>12</sup> Post-exposure opinion differences among members of the treatment groups and those in the control group were consistent with these results: policy support among low- and middle-income people was 26.1 percentage points higher after reading the strong hegemonic story than was support among this participant subgroup after reading the control story, while post-exposure opposition among low- and middle-income people was 19.2 points higher in the WH condition than in the control group ( $p < .05$ ).

These effects are more striking if we look just at low-income people (i.e., those who reported annual household incomes of less than \$40,000). After these participants — whose material conditions would be most harmed by the neoliberal-New Right policy initiative — read the weak hegemonic story, they doubled their opposition to the proposal, increasing unfavorable opinions from 35.7 percent to 71.4 percent ( $p < .05$ ). At the same, support remained at 21.4 percent. Thus, post-exposure opinion among low-income participants was dramatically more favorable in the SH condition — which featured a news story (closely modeled on the actual patterns of coverage during the 1981 Reagan economic plan and the 1995-1996 welfare reform episodes) dominated by right-wing populist themes and official sources — than in the weak hegemonic condition: favorability was nearly 37 points higher in the SH condition, while opposition was more than 46 points higher in the WH condition ( $p < .05$ ).

<sup>12</sup> The difference in the magnitude of policy opinion change (adjusted for direction) between low- and middle-income participants in the WH condition and high-income participants in the same condition is not statistically significant: a difference-of-means test produced a p-value of .363. However, Figure 8-4 suggests strongly that this is due to a small sample size: there were just 10 high-income participants in the weak hegemonic group. Moreover, the movement in expressed policy preferences from the pre- to the post-treatment stage was in the theoretically expected direction: low- and middle-income participants moved an average of .2333 steps on the scale in the direction of opposition, while high-income people moved an average of .1 steps toward support.

Overall, my evidence shows that heavy reception of hegemonic news frames even in a single story can cause low- and middle-income people to connect their material circumstances to economic and social welfare policy issues in ways that are favorable to neoliberal-New Right-New Democrat interpretations, prompting them to express considerably more support for conservative policy initiatives than they otherwise would. These results provide strong evidence for working hypothesis A2. Thus, the articulations forged in my mock news story by Mitch McConnell, John Boehner, Barack Obama and a (fictitious) Wall Street economist were relatively effective in encouraging conservative interpretations of economic and social welfare policy that appeared plausible to low- and middle-income constituencies. However, when these participants were exposed to critical frames — including those disseminated by voices (such as Paul Krugman) from outside the formal state apparatus — they expressed very different patterns of opinion. This shows that oppositional articulations can effectively shape levels of mass consent for conservative policy regimes among lower-status constituencies.

The large opinion differences among low- and middle-income people exposed to variable types of news discourse are particularly remarkable because the SH story is not homogenously in favor of neoliberal-New Right ideas: rather, it is a realistic facsimile of a *USA Today* report that closely mimics the basic substantive content and the numerical ratio of sources and messages in mainstream media coverage of the policy episodes in my case studies: as I discuss in Chapters 4 and 6, professional norms impel journalists to rarely report stories that include voices and perspectives from only one side of a policy controversy. Still, the slant of such coverage is apparently strong enough to move poll results significantly.

However, as neo-Gramscian theorists have long argued, material circumstances do not simply and mechanically determine people's political consciousness. Broad value-

orientations — constructed and reconstructed over years of social learning and practice centered on family, peers, the formal education system, the workplace, voluntary organizations, the mass media and much else — also operate to shape political cognition and activity. What role can hegemonic news discourse play in forging articulations between economic and social welfare policy issues and these pre-existing social understandings? Can such media coverage cause people to express policy opinions that seem to contradict these broad understandings — opinions they would not express under different communicative conditions? I address these questions in the next section, focusing on values of socioeconomic egalitarianism.

## **VI. Results by Levels of Egalitarianism: Hegemonic News Discourse and Social Values**

In broad outline, the effects on policy opinion of exposure to news discourse according to participants' relative espousal of egalitarian values closely mirror those according to family income. In other words, when people who reported 1) beliefs in systemic (rather than individualistic) explanations for economic inequality and deprivation, 2) higher levels of worry about rising inequality, 3) preferences for collective (including state) efforts to address social and economic problems (rather than reliance on private markets), and 4) desires for wealthy people to pay more taxes, read a news story tilted toward neoliberal-New Right voices, policy approaches and social understandings, these participants expressed significantly higher favorability toward the initiative under discussion. In contrast, when similar participants read a newspaper article on the same issue that included a more balanced array of sources and a greater ideological diversity of policy frames — including several that evoked potentially counter-hegemonic understandings grounded in ideas of social solidarity — they expressed greater opposition to the neoliberal-New Right economic policy plan.

This suggests that news coverage can play an important role in variably obscuring and weakening, or highlighting and strengthening, linkages between popular social understandings, current economic conditions, and public policy issues.

As discussed in the Appendix, I created a socioeconomic egalitarianism scale by summing the answers to five questions, and then grouping respondents into those who expressed stronger commitments to egalitarian values and those who expressed weaker commitments.<sup>13</sup> Figure 8-5 depicts policy opinion change according to these categorizations in the SH condition. As seen in the left panel of the graph, policy support and opposition among highly egalitarian participants increased by similar percentage-point totals after exposure to the strong hegemonic story (we see a 26-point jump in support for the conservative initiative and a 30-point increase in opposition). However, the proportional increase in favorability was higher than the proportional increase in opposition: reported support more than tripled — going from 13 percent to 39.1 percent ( $p < .05$ ) — while opposition increased by a factor of 2.7, from 17.4 percent to 47.8 percent. As expected, among those expressing low levels of egalitarianism (depicted in the right panel of the figure), support for the neoliberal-New Right policy initiative surged from 35.7 percent to 78.6 percent, and opposition dropped from 28.6 percent to 21.4 percent. To be sure, highly egalitarian participants tilted moderately against the conservative proposal even after reading the SH story. This is a reminder that news coverage is not strongly determinative of expressed policy opinion: working from their existing knowledge, social understandings and material positions, people sometimes engage in what Stuart Hall first termed “negotiated” or “resistant” readings of news texts, arguing against hegemonic messages that are not consonant with their material and cultural predispositions. Still, my evidence clearly shows

<sup>13</sup> As I note above, the items that I used to construct the egalitarianism measure appeared on the pre-test portion of the survey, before participants read the newspaper stories.

that mainstream media coverage largely supporting the neoliberal-New Right hegemony can have significant effects even on people with strong egalitarian tendencies.

However, these participants reacted to the WH treatment quite differently: after reading a newspaper story on the policy proposal that included a more balanced array of voices and messages —along with some substantive information on the economic plan's immediate, concrete implications —highly egalitarian people reported much greater levels of opposition. As shown on the left side of Figure 8-6, after reading the weak hegemonic version, highly egalitarian participants more than doubled their level of policy opposition, from 29.2 percent to 62.5 percent ( $p < .05$ ); support increased by a much smaller magnitude, from 20.8 percent to 29.1 percent.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, the post-news exposure distributions of opinion among those who expressed strongly egalitarian values were consistent and in the expected directions across the experimental groups: policy favorability was 12.8 percentage points higher in the SH condition than in the control group, while opposition in the WH group was 18.1 points than in the control condition ( $p < .05$ ).<sup>15</sup> Thus, as predicted by my theoretical framework, strongly and weakly hegemonic patterns of news coverage have divergent effects on opinion even among people who profess consistent commitments to egalitarian values.

I also investigated effects on policy opinion among people who specifically reported greater concern with the rising economic inequality of recent decades. I conducted these

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<sup>14</sup> The difference in the magnitude of policy opinion change (adjusted for direction) between highly egalitarian participants in the WH condition and low-egalitarian participants in the same condition is statistically significant at the  $p < .15$  level. And movement in expressed policy preferences from the pre- to the post-treatment stage was in the theoretically expected direction: highly egalitarian participants moved an average of .4167 steps on the scale in the direction of opposition, while low-egalitarian people moved an average of .25 steps toward support.

<sup>15</sup> Policy favorability differences for highly egalitarian participants after reading the SH story and those in the control condition are not significant under commonly accepted metrics. However, the divergence in mean levels of post-exposure policy support for these participants and for their counterparts in the control group produced a p-value of .231. This represents a confidence level of more than 77 percent that the differences in opinion among similar members of the two groups were caused by exposure to the news treatment. In light of the consistent results in other tests of effects based on levels of egalitarianism, and the small sample sizes in the study, this lack of conventional statistical significance does not throw serious doubt on my overall interpretations and conclusions.

analyses because increasing inequality of wealth and income has been a crucial focus of much of the American politics scholarship on the right turn in public policy, and researchers view general attitudes toward these trends as key indicators shaping citizens' preferences for government action (Hacker and Pierson 2005a, 2005b; Bartels 2005, 2008; Page and Jacobs 2009). My findings on this measure largely mirror those from analyses focused on the overall egalitarianism scale.

Support for the New Right-neoliberal economic initiative among those in the SH condition who reported that increasing inequality was “a serious problem” increased from 8.3 percent pre-exposure to 45.6 percent post-exposure (or by more than five times;  $p < .05$ ), while opposition increased from 20.8 percent to 41.7 percent. However, reading the WH story caused policy opposition among these participants to surge from 23.1 percent to 57.7 percent ( $p < .05$ ), while favorability increased marginally, from 30.8 percent to 34.6 percent. And, differences in post-media exposure policy preferences among those who expressed the highest levels of concern about rising inequality were consistent and in the predicted direction across conditions: support was 17.6 percentage points higher in the SH condition than in the control group ( $p < .05$ ), while opposition was 29.7 points higher in the weak hegemonic condition than in the control condition ( $p < .05$ ). Thus, reading a mainstream news story slanted in favor of New Right-neoliberal voices, policy approaches and social understandings caused many people who see rising inequality as a “serious problem” to express support for a conservative plan that would increase such inequality: indeed, a plurality of those in this subgroup expressed support for the initiative after just a single exposure to hegemonic news coverage.

These findings are an important corrective to recent research attempting to understand the apparent inconsistencies and ambiguities of mass policy opinion toward the

rightward shift: for example, Bartels (2005, 2008) finds that even large percentages of citizens who express great worry about rising inequality have registered support for policies like the George W. Bush tax plans of 2001 and 2003. But his work is similar to most other studies in this area in that it fails to account for the crucial role of news coverage and political discourse in either activating or obscuring links between people's socioeconomic values and the specific policy preferences they report in opinion surveys.<sup>16</sup> Again, analyses of poll results that abstract from the cultural and communicative context of elite discourse and mass media coverage are analytically incomplete.

Results of tests that categorize participants according to their partisan and ideological identification are similar to those for levels of socioeconomic egalitarianism, but considerably less consistent.<sup>17</sup> I attribute these differences to the fact that my measure of socioeconomic egalitarianism is a more precise way to operationalize the value-predispositions most relevant to the policy areas I focus on. This scale taps people's reported beliefs in a constellation of areas directly related to economic and social welfare policy under neoliberalism: not only their level of concern about the rising material inequality that has characterized the era, but also their subjective understandings of the main *reasons* for unequal economic opportunities and standards of living, in addition to their relative confidence in private market processes vs. state social provision and business regulation, their preferences for social vs. market-based allocations of economic opportunity, and their beliefs in the class fairness of the U.S. tax structure. Thus, the egalitarianism measure comprises multiple indicators that capture a cluster of related belief dimensions concerning economic and social welfare policy. As such, compared to other measures at the individual psychological level, it

<sup>16</sup> See Guardino (2007) for a study of elite discourse and mainstream TV coverage during the 2001 tax policy episode; the evidence strongly suggests that these apparent inconsistencies of opinion were due in substantial part to hegemonic communications influence.

<sup>17</sup> Data from these analyses according to partisan and ideological ID are available from the author upon request.

is arguably quite sensitive to various elements that make up popular social understandings of the U.S. political economy.<sup>18</sup>

Overall, the balance of evidence strongly supports my proposition that the strength of ideological hegemony expressed through news discourse can have significant effects in facilitating or hindering connections among people's pre-existing social-economic understandings and their specific policy preferences. Thus, my results confirm empirical expectation A3. In the strong hegemonic version of the *USA Today* report, the conservative-populist arguments and representations circulated by GOP political elites, their allies and President Obama appeared to prime fragments of common sense that favored neoliberal-New Right policy approaches *even* among many people in whose minds such considerations were relatively less accessible and salient before exposure to the news story. But in the WH treatment, when similar participants were exposed to a more balanced array of policy messages from a more diverse range of voices, these communications facilitated oppositional articulations that appeared to more effectively activate considerations favoring left-leaning political-economic responses to the survey question.

However, the factors affecting the influence of mass media coverage on opinion go beyond the form and content of that coverage, and beyond individual-level differences in material circumstances and socioeconomic value-orientations. Previous research suggests that existing levels of factual public affairs knowledge — both knowledge about general

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<sup>18</sup> In contrast, to the extent that people adopt partisan and ideological labels because of core policy-relevant political-economic understandings, these measures capture some respondents' preferences and perceptions regarding less related issue dimensions, such as foreign policy orientations and tendencies toward socio-cultural libertarianism vs. authoritarianism. Moreover, popular understandings of what it means to be a "liberal" or a "conservative" do not necessarily map neatly onto political observers' sense of substantive policy differences. And people attach themselves to partisan identifications for reasons (such as family tradition) that have little to do with substantive political beliefs and policy stances in any form: they sometimes form emotional connections to parties early in life that are relatively resistant to change and that may not comport with common understandings of cross-partisan policy differences. Finally, in a system with just two major parties, the coalitions that back each side are relatively ideologically diverse; in the contemporary U.S. historical context, the Democratic Party is more diverse in this sense than is the Republican Party (although it is less ideologically diverse than a generation ago).



political processes, actors and institutions, and knowledge that pertains more closely to specific policy areas — moderates the effects of news discourse (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Gilens 2001). Such knowledge — like the general value-orientations tapped by my measure of socioeconomic egalitarianism — is a product of varying concrete experiences and social practices across people’s lifetimes, including previous engagements with mass media and other sites for the propagation of political discourse. I turn now to empirically investigating precisely how these knowledge dynamics facilitate or dampen the impacts of hegemonic news on policy opinion.

### **VII. Political Awareness: Blunting Hegemonic Discourse, Facilitating Critical Reception**

My results show clearly that existing levels of general political and issue-specific knowledge can significantly moderate the processes by which variably hegemonic media coverage shapes mass policy opinion. Experiment participants with higher levels of such knowledge were more resistant to hegemonic political discourse that would otherwise obscure linkages between the specific neoliberal-New Right policy plan under discussion, on the one hand, and their proximate material circumstances and broad socioeconomic understandings, on the other. These participants also tended to be more receptive to discourse critical of the conservative policy plan that strengthened such articulations. For those with low knowledge levels, the dynamics were reversed: these participants were much more vulnerable to hegemonic news influence, as well as less open to potentially counter-hegemonic discourse that activated critical linkages between neoliberal-New Right economic policy and their proximate material interests. This evidence underscores the limits to hegemonic media influence. However, as I discuss at the end of this section, when understood within the broad social context that surrounds knowledge dynamics under

neoliberalism, my findings are considerably less hopeful from the standpoint of popular political agency.<sup>19</sup>

Among low- and middle-income participants in my experiment, those with low levels of political and policy knowledge reacted to the communications treatments very differently than did their counterparts with higher levels of such knowledge.<sup>20</sup> As seen in the left panel of Figure 8-7, reported favorability toward the conservative economic plan among low- and middle-income participants with the lowest levels of existing knowledge nearly doubled after reading the strong hegemonic story, increasing from 38.5 percent pre-exposure to 76.9 percent post-exposure ( $p < .05$ ). Policy opposition among this sub-population actually *dropped*, falling by half, from 30.8 percent to 15.4 percent ( $p < .05$ ). But low- and middle-income participants who had at least moderate levels of political and policy knowledge before reading the strong hegemonic news story (shown on the right side of the graph) turned significantly against the neoliberal-New Right initiative after being exposed to a preponderance of voices and frames that favored the plan.<sup>21</sup> Thus, pre-existing levels of knowledge appear to play a strong role in insulating news audiences from the effects of

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<sup>19</sup> My analyses in this section focus on low- and middle-income participants — and those who exhibit high levels of socioeconomic egalitarianism — because my project is most concerned with the effects of mainstream news discourse on the attitudes and perceptions of these constituencies in the context of the rightward turn in economic and social welfare policy under neoliberalism.

<sup>20</sup> As I discuss in more detail in the Appendix, I created two scales to measure general political and specific policy knowledge. The first was generated from answers to four questions on general political processes, actors and institutions based on a standard battery used in similar surveys (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1993). The second was based on a set of four questions that I constructed to tap overall levels of economic and social welfare policy knowledge in the context of my project.

My initial plan was to test the separate moderating effects of general political and policy-specific knowledge. However, the distribution of knowledge regarding economic and social welfare policy in my sample was weighted too far toward the low end to feasibly use this scale by itself: I could not identify a way to group participants according to degree of policy-specific knowledge in a way that would be substantively meaningful and yet amenable to statistical analyses. However, in order not to lose completely the value of testing the effects on opinion of pre-existing issue-specific knowledge, I created a summary scale based on both the general political knowledge test and the policy-specific knowledge assessment. This measure allowed me to capture something of the combined impact of both species of knowledge on the reception or rejection of mass media discourse. I use the summary scale for the analyses reported in this chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Post-exposure opinion differences between members of the two knowledge sub-groups in the strong hegemonic condition are also significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

coverage that obscures the linkages between policy issues and their immediate material interests.

My results also suggest that political and policy knowledge can *facilitate* the reception of critical news discourse. While low- and middle-income people at all knowledge levels shifted against the conservative economic plan after reading the weak hegemonic story, the magnitude of this move was much larger among more knowledgeable participants. As seen on the left side of Figure 8-8, policy opposition among low-knowledge, low- and middle-income participants increased 25 points after they read the WH story (from 20 percent to 45 percent [ $p < .05$ ]); support increased just 15 points (from 30 percent to 45 percent). Thus, favorability toward the neoliberal-New Right economic plan among these participants was 31.9 percentage points higher after the SH treatment than after the WH treatment, while opposition was 29.6 points higher after the weak hegemonic treatment than after the strong hegemonic treatment. However, low- and middle-income participants with moderate or high levels of pre-existing political and policy knowledge moved more strongly against the plan after reading the WH report than did their low-knowledge counterparts: opposition among this sub-group more than doubled (from 30 percent to 70 percent [ $p < .05$ ]), while support increased just 10 points, from 20 percent to 30 percent.<sup>22</sup> In other words, while opinion among low-knowledge, low- and middle-income participants was certainly less favorable after these participants read a news story that used culturally resonant discourse to more clearly and consistently connect the economic plan to their proximate material circumstances, attitudes were split evenly for and against the proposal even after the WH treatment. This suggests that higher levels of pre-existing knowledge facilitated the reception

<sup>22</sup> Post-exposure differences in opinion among low-knowledge, low-/middle-income participants also are consistent and in the expected direction: policy support is 56.9 percentage points higher in the SH treatment than in the control group, and opposition is 25 points higher in the WH condition than in the control ( $p < .05$ ).

of news discourse that criticized the conservative policy plan, thus helping low- and middle-income participants to process messages in ways that allowed them to express opinions that cohere with the plan's implications for their immediate material conditions.<sup>23</sup>

Pre-existing political and policy knowledge played a similar role in blunting the effects of hegemonic news discourse on participants who expressed strongly egalitarian values. As seen in the left panel of Figure 8-9, policy favorability among highly egalitarian participants with low levels of knowledge nearly doubled after they were exposed to the SH story, increasing from 27.3 percent to 54.5 percent ( $p < .15$ ); opposition increased by just 9.1 points (from 27.3 percent to 36.4 percent). However, among highly egalitarian participants with high or moderate levels of political and policy knowledge, opposition to the neoliberal-New Right economic plan actually ballooned more than seven-fold after reading the strong hegemonic newspaper story, increasing from 8.3 percent pre-exposure to 63.6 percent post-exposure ( $p < .05$ ); at the same time, favorability increased from 0 percent to 27.3 percent.<sup>24</sup> It appears that among participants who entered the experiment with higher levels of political and policy knowledge, the preponderance of conservative sources and policy messages in the SH story had relatively little effect in forging articulations that would reduce the salience of their broadly egalitarian social understandings. However, those with lower knowledge levels were significantly more susceptible to hegemonic influence; among these participants, the neoliberal-New Right messages in the *USA Today* story effectively weakened connections

<sup>23</sup> Policy opinion among high-/moderate-knowledge, high-income participants who read the SH news story changed by a nearly identical magnitude as did opinion among high-/moderate-knowledge, low-/middle-income people who read the WH version, although in the opposite — and theoretically predicted — direction: favorability among the first group increased 50 percentage points and opposition increased just 8.3 points, for a post-exposure distribution of 66.7 percent support and 25 percent opposition, or a difference in post-exposure opinion of 41.7 percent in favor. As noted above, post-exposure opinion among low-/moderate-income participants with higher levels of knowledge in the WH condition exhibited a difference of 40 points in the direction of opposition. These results confirm that existing knowledge facilitates the reception of media discourse that connects specific policy issues to people's proximate economic conditions: the proportions of experiment participants who expressed opinions that cohere with their material predispositions after reading a news report featuring discourse that emphasized these articulations (the strong hegemonic version for high-income people, the weak hegemonic for low-/middle-income participants) were nearly identical.

<sup>24</sup> Moreover, in the SH treatment the post-exposure differences in policy support between low-knowledge, highly egalitarian participants, and their moderate-/high-knowledge counterparts, are significant at  $p < .05$ .

between the specific issue under discussion and their broad beliefs in favor of greater economic equality and collective approaches to social problems.

But the weak hegemonic treatment had somewhat different effects on highly egalitarian participants with low levels of political and policy knowledge than it did on low- and middle-income participants with similarly low levels of knowledge. As depicted in Figure 8-10, even low-knowledge participants turned strongly against the conservative economic plan after they were exposed to a more critical news story. The post-exposure distribution of policy opinion among these highly egalitarian participants was actually somewhat more opposed than among their counterparts with moderate or high levels of knowledge.<sup>25</sup> In fact, the overall shape of policy opinion among the latter participants was quite similar after reading the SH story and reading the WH version.<sup>26</sup> Thus, it appears that instead of pre-existing knowledge facilitating the reception of critical news discourse (as was the case among low- and middle-income people), the results from my analyses of opinion among highly egalitarian participants suggest that such critical discourse itself can operate as a kind of equalizing force for those at lower ends of the political knowledge spectrum: in the weak hegemonic condition, the distributions of post-exposure policy opinion were fairly similar among those in both knowledge categories. This suggests that reading a mainstream news story that includes a roughly equal balance of sources and frames in favor of and opposed to a neoliberal-New Right initiative (along with a greater proportion of voices from outside official government circles, and a piece of concrete, policy-relevant information), can

<sup>25</sup> Increases in policy opposition among low-knowledge, highly egalitarian participants in the WH condition are statistically significant at the  $p < .15$  level; increases in opposition among their moderate- and high-knowledge counterparts are significant at  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>26</sup> Post-exposure differences in policy opinion among low-knowledge, highly egalitarian participants are consistent and in the expected directions comparing the SH condition, the WH condition and the control group: support was 54.5 percent higher in the strong hegemonic condition than in the control group ( $p < .05$  level), and opposition was 33.4 percent higher in the WH group than in the control condition ( $p < .15$ ; the lack of significance according to the more stringent test is likely due to the very small sample size [ $N=9$ ]).

facilitate the expression of opinion that coheres with people's broad social understandings even among respondents with very little factual knowledge of politics and policy.

Overall, my findings offer fairly potent support for working hypotheses B1 and B2: knowing basic facts about politics and public policy seems to increase the likelihood that people whose predispositions orient them in a potentially counter-hegemonic direction will engage in what Hall (1980a) has termed negotiated or resistant readings of media texts: i.e., processing hegemonic messages in ways that blunt their impact on opinion expression, and processing critical messages in ways that highlight their significance. The evidence is strong and relatively consistent using a number of different indicators and analytic strategies: I employed as variables general political and specific policy knowledge, income, and a multidimensional measure of socioeconomic beliefs, and I tested for effects among the same people exposed to a particular news treatment, and among comparable participants exposed to different treatments.

The only evidentiary anomaly in this section is my finding that existing political and policy knowledge seems to play a somewhat different role for people with highly egalitarian values who are exposed to a weakly hegemonic news story: here, the oppositional discourse in that report appears to have strengthened critical articulations among low-knowledge participants to the point that policy opinion among them took a shape very similar to that among their higher-knowledge counterparts. This finding is intriguing because it suggests that — since the effects that I identify through single exposures in the experiment are likely to be cumulative in the “real world” — the consistent production of media coverage that is less tightly hegemonic than the norm might have significant implications for patterns of political voice even among those who are often written off as incapable of (and/or uninterested in) understanding public affairs: a little more sourcing balance, policy

information, and diversity in issue frames and attendant social visions might make a fairly big difference in public opinion over periods of months and years.

I interpret these findings to suggest that the command of basic facts is a kind of proxy for cognitive capacities that are sufficiently developed to critically evaluate news discourse, as well as a proxy for chronic (first- and second-hand) participation in forums that encourage learning and, thus, the broader elaboration of political consciousness. These might include not only engagement with mainstream and alternative news sources, but also face-to-face discussions in families, neighborhoods, workplaces, union halls, explicitly political groups and elsewhere. As I stress in earlier parts of my study, I certainly do not claim that knowledge of political and policy facts is by itself enough to spur significant decreases in expressions of popular consent for neoliberal-New Right initiatives as manifested in public opinion polls. But my evidence here does suggest that such knowledge can play an important role in effectuating at the individual level any critical and potentially counter-hegemonic political arguments that people may be exposed to.

However, it is important to understand that hegemonic processes also operate crucially to shape the extent, distribution and substance of factual political knowledge itself among popular constituencies. Levels of general political and policy-specific knowledge in the U.S. mass public are generally low compared to those in other industrialized capitalist-democracies (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997: 89-91; Iyengar and Hahn 2011: 212-16).<sup>27</sup> And

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<sup>27</sup> For example, 72 percent of my experimental sample could correctly identify which major political party would have the most members in the House of Representatives during 2011; with just two choices, random guessing should produce the correct answer 50 percent of the time. And, as I note in the Appendix, my sample was somewhat more affluent — and certainly whiter — than the U.S. population as a whole. This suggests that the levels of political and policy knowledge in this group are higher than the norm.

In a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press the week after the November elections (available at: <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1804/political-news-quiz-iq-deficit-defense-spending-tarp-inflation-boehner>), 75 percent of respondents correctly identified the Republicans as gaining congressional seats (chance would yield 50 percent); just 39 percent correctly identified military programs as taking up the largest proportion of the federal budget among four choices offered (chance = 25 percent); 38 percent identified John Boehner as the likely new speaker of the House of Representatives (chance = 25 percent); and just 16 percent correctly answered that more than half of the federal loans to financial institutions under the Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) had been paid back (chance = 25 percent).

patterns of knowledge are closely correlated with socioeconomic status — those with lower levels of income, wealth and formal education (as well as, generally, members of racial and ethnic minority groups) are significantly less likely to be knowledgeable about and interested or active in public affairs (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997: esp. 156-73; Jacobs and Skocpol 2005).<sup>28</sup> Structural and institutional constraints that are intensifying under neoliberalism may have much to do with this: unequal access to quality education, increases in work hours and employment insecurity, changes in the mass media environment, and other factors have combined to widen these gaps in recent decades.<sup>29</sup>

Thus, information is not only (as my experiment demonstrates) a pre-existing moderator of the power of hegemonic news discourse to shape patterns of popular support for public policies and political arrangements. It is also a *product* of such discourse and the material factors traversing the state, economy and civil society that shape cultural and communications production and reception. Indeed, mainstream media generally circulates little factual information pertaining to specific policy areas: as I show through my content analyses in Chapters 4 and 6, evening TV news and mass-market print coverage very rarely offered facts about the distribution of immediate benefits across income groups in the 1981 Reagan tax plan, the comparative impacts of income and payroll taxes on low- and middle-income people, the share of the federal budget taken up by welfare spending, or enrollment in the AFDC program by racial category. Thus, it is unsurprising that levels of economic and social welfare policy knowledge — both in the United States at-large, and in my sample — are so low: just 17.4 percent of experiment participants correctly answered that Social

<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in my sample, annual income is strongly correlated with both general political knowledge (coefficient = .321) and the combined general political-specific policy knowledge measure (.283). Both relationships are statistically significant at the  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>29</sup> Prior (2007) offers clear evidence that the rise of new media (cable TV and the Internet) has increased polarization in mass political knowledge and engagement: the “information revolution” has (among other effects) widened the gap between those Americans who are most informed and active (who tend to be wealthier, more highly educated and white), and those who are least.



Security and Medicare taxes have the biggest immediate financial impact on low- and middle income people (guessing on this multiple-choice question should produce correct answers 20 percent of the time); 17.4 percent could correctly estimate the proportion of the annual federal budget (1.5 percent) spent on food stamps (random guessing should garner the right answer 25 percent of the time); and a minuscule 3.5 percent correctly answered that 0.5 percent of federal spending goes for cash welfare (guessing should produce the correct response 25 percent of the time). If pre-existing patterns of factual knowledge can intensify or blunt the effects of hegemonic news discourse on policy opinion, then the sociopolitical implications of these data are sobering for anyone concerned with countering the right turn under neoliberalism.<sup>30</sup>

My theoretical framework and the case study evidence I marshal in Chapters 4 through 7 suggest that hegemonic media coverage can not only shape signals of popular consent as expressed in poll results probing opinions toward specific government policies, but can also affect broader perceptions and attitudes about the political system. Specifically, I propose that media coverage dominated by official government voices that emphasizes a spectacle of procedural, strategic and tactical maneuvering tends to reduce people's sense of effective political agency, particularly for members of lower-status popular constituencies. In contrast, I expect that news coverage featuring a broader array of sources (especially those who are not government officials and representatives of other hegemonic institutions), and more substantive ideological argument and policy information, will have opposite effects, increasing people's feeling that they can understand public issues, and that their voices and actions can affect policy. I explore these dynamics in the next section.

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<sup>30</sup> Other experimental research has shown that merely informing low- and middle-income people of the percentage of financial benefits that certain tax policies provide to different income groups can cause them to turn sharply against programs (such as the Home Mortgage Interest Deduction and the Retirement Savings Contribution Tax Credit) that mostly benefit the affluent and wealthy (Mettler and Guardino 2011).

### VIII. News Discourse and Political Efficacy: “People Say All Different Things”

My findings regarding the effects of hegemonic news discourse on political efficacy offer suggestive evidence that mainstream media coverage can dampen low- and middle-income people’s sense that the political system is responsive, and their sense that they can comprehend and navigate public affairs. While differences in reported political efficacy among experiment participants as a whole are generally consistent and in the direction predicted by my theoretical framework, in most cases they are neither substantively large nor statistically significant.<sup>31</sup> Thus, I focus in this section on efficacy effects among lower-status participants, for which the experiment generated stronger support. Overall, my evidence regarding the potentially demobilizing effects of mainstream news coverage is considerably weaker and less consistent than are my findings regarding effects on policy preferences. However, as I argue at the end of this section, this is probably due in part to study design and conceptual issues unique to tests of political efficacy. My evidence is tentative, but it is a promising foundation on which to build further research into the impacts of the “political spectacle” (Edelman 1988) on the systemic perceptions particularly of lower-status constituencies — and the implications of these effects for democratic agency under neoliberalism.

My strongest evidentiary support for the effects of hegemonic media coverage on political efficacy emerges from between-subjects tests (i.e. comparisons of post-exposure perceptions among members of each experimental condition), rather than within-subjects tests (changes in perceptions for the same participants after they are exposed to a particular treatment). I begin with internal political efficacy, which measures people’s confidence in understanding public affairs and navigating the political system. Here, I used a standard

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<sup>31</sup> Data on the effects of news exposure on political efficacy among participants as a whole are available upon request.

survey item that asks respondents the extent to which they agree with the following statement: “Politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”<sup>32</sup> As shown in Figure 8-11, differences in responses to this question among low- and middle-income participants are relatively large, consistent and in the predicted direction. After reading the strong hegemonic version of the *USA Today* story — which was dominated by official government sources and stressed political procedure, strategy and tactics rather than policy substance — 76.2 percent of these participants agreed “strongly” or “somewhat” with the prompt (indicating low internal efficacy). This compared to 23.8 who disagreed “strongly” or “somewhat” (indicating high efficacy). After reading the WH news report — which included more non-official sources, less procedural/strategic/tactical content, and a crucial piece of concrete policy information — just 46.7 percent of low- and middle-income participants reported low internal efficacy, compared to 53.3 percent who reported high levels. Results were similar for those in the control group: after reading the story on celebrity news and movies, 55.5 percent reported low levels of internal efficacy, compared to 44.8 who reported high levels.<sup>33</sup>

This evidence suggests that in addition to shaping specific policy preferences, mainstream media coverage that emphasizes the spectacle of elite gamesmanship and that is focused on seemingly insubstantial jockeying for strategic advantage can encourage subjective feelings of powerlessness, especially among low- and middle-income people. By presenting politics as an inside game for government officials and other “experts” and by failing to stress the substantive implications of public policy debates, coverage like that which was so prevalent during the 1981 and 1995-1996 episodes I analyze in Chapters 4

<sup>32</sup> Possible answers ranged from “agree strongly” to “disagree strongly.”

<sup>33</sup> Differences in post-exposure internal political efficacy scores for low- and middle-income participants in the strong hegemonic condition and those for similar participants assigned to the control group are statistically significant at  $p < .15$ . Differences between those exposed to the WH treatment and similar participants in the control are not significant.

through 7 may have made public affairs seem less understandable than it otherwise would. Thus, my experimental analyses provide qualified support for working hypothesis A4.

This sense that politics and public policy are opaque and mysterious is not confined to those at lower levels of the socioeconomic hierarchy. Comments from one study participant in response to the open-ended thought-listing question (which I discuss in more detail in the following section), offered after reading the SH story, are illustrative: “I really don’t know. Confused. People say all different things.” This person, who is a white woman with a master’s degree reporting an annual household income of \$150,000 to \$199,999, was one of very few participants who chose not to express a policy opinion after reading one of the treatment stories. Still, low- and middle-income (and less-educated) people typically are more alienated from U.S. institutional politics than are their high-income counterparts (and they tend to have lower levels of public affairs knowledge); my evidence suggests that some of this alienation may result from exposure to hegemonic news coverage. I return to the larger implications of these effects for popular political agency and the shaping of mass consent under neoliberalism at the end of this section.

My findings regarding the effects of media coverage on external political efficacy (i.e. the extent to which people believe that the political system and policymakers are responsive to their interests and values) mirror those for internal efficacy. These data are based on a standard question that asked participants the extent to which they agreed with the following statement: “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.”<sup>34</sup> The sense that political leaders and policymakers in general are “out of touch” with citizens — unconcerned with (or even hostile to) popular sentiment was strong and widespread throughout my

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<sup>34</sup> Again, potential answers ranged from “agree strongly” to “disagree strongly.”

sample.<sup>35</sup> However, as was the case with internal efficacy, high-income people generally reported more confidence in public officials' responsiveness to their concerns than did lower-income participants.<sup>36</sup>

Figure 8-12 shows the relative percentages by income of participants who agreed strongly that “public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” Differences on this indicator are stark. After reading the SH story, 52.4 percent of low- and middle-income people agreed strongly with the statement, compared to just 25 percent of participants as a whole who were assigned to this treatment. In contrast, after reading the more ideologically expansive and balanced, less elite-dominated, and more substantive news report, just 30 percent of low- and middle-income participants reported very low levels of external efficacy.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, it is only in the strong hegemonic condition that we see large differences according to socioeconomic status in the propensity to express this extreme level of estrangement from the political system.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it seems that exposure to news reports that systematically favor neoliberal-New Right voices and interpretations, and which present politics as an elite spectacle, have their strongest and most consistent demobilizing effects among the very constituencies who have suffered the brunt of the right turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy. This suggests that a steady diet of mainstream media coverage resembling my evidence in Chapters 4 through 7 not only may have encouraged

<sup>35</sup> The mean response among all participants to the post-exposure external efficacy question was 1.97. In contrast, the mean post-exposure internal efficacy score was 2.63 (1=agree strongly, 2=agree somewhat, 3=disagree somewhat, 4=disagree strongly). Thus, people tended to express greater confidence in their own capacities for political thought and action than they did in officials' willingness or ability to respond to their demands.

<sup>36</sup> There is a strong evidentiary basis for these perceptions in recent quantitative research showing much greater policy responsiveness to the views of high-income people than to those of lower-income people, when the preferences of these constituencies differ (Gilens 2005). See Page (1983) for a discussion of the concrete policy benefits according to socioeconomic status that may be produced by this unequal responsiveness.

<sup>37</sup> Differences in the proportions of low- and middle-income participants in the SH condition reporting the lowest levels of external efficacy on the post-test and those of similar participants offering the same response in the control group are statistically significant that the  $p < .05$  level.

<sup>38</sup> An OLS regression model confirms this dimension of my argument: controlling for pre-exposure levels of external political efficacy, the interaction between reporting a lower income and being in the SH treatment tends to dampen post-exposure efficacy (coefficient =  $-.061$ ;  $p < .05$ ).

many low- and middle-income people to express support for neoliberal policies, but also may have cultivated feelings of profound disconnection from the political system in these constituencies.

My experimental design does not allow for empirically distinguishing which elements of discourse in the treatment stories prompted the decreases in political efficacy that participants exhibited: the strong and weak hegemonic versions differed in: 1) the rightward tilt of sources and frames, and 2) The volume of procedural, strategic or tactical content (vs. substantive policy content), and the frequency of official vs. non-official sources. Because I do not have a separate treatment that varies just the second set of content dimensions (and leaves constant the relative right-left ideological slant of the report), I cannot attribute the findings of dampened efficacy as confidently to the elite political spectacle per se as I otherwise might. However, my interpretation is theoretically grounded: less policy substance; more content related to governmental procedure, political strategy and tactics; and a greater focus on political elites (as opposed to non-official voices, including social movement representatives and ordinary citizens) should lead to greater feelings that the political system is hard to understand and that popular constituencies have little power.

Overall, my evidence for the effects of hegemonic news discourse on political efficacy is weaker and less consistent than that for effects on economic and social welfare policy opinion. However, three key factors should be kept in mind when interpreting these results. First, reported levels of external efficacy were very low across the sample before participants were exposed to media coverage of any kind.<sup>39</sup> This makes it difficult to pick up substantively meaningful and statistically significant decreases using the pre- and post-test measures: with efficacy already so low, there is little room for it to drop further. Moreover,

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<sup>39</sup> The mean response on the pre-exposure external efficacy measure was 1.96.

the news story I wrote for the SH condition, while it closely mirrored the dominant patterns of coverage in my case studies, may understate the prevalence of procedural, strategic and tactical content that audiences are frequently exposed to. My quantitative analyses in Chapters 4 and 6 show non-substantive coverage of this kind comprising 30 percent to 50 percent of news discourse across each policy debate, depending on the particular policy episode, the media format and the content indicator employed. I chose to be cautious and construct the experimental story to include procedural, strategic and tactical coverage at the lower end of this scale. In addition, I aimed to write a news report that mirrored a “typical” one from my case studies, but which included enough substantive discourse to test for effects on policy opinion. It should be made clear, however, that a not-insubstantial share of total stories in each case were focused *primarily* on the elite political spectacle, and thus were veritably dominated by procedural, strategic and tactical content (as well as by official sources).<sup>40</sup> Exposure to experimental treatments modeled on this more thoroughly “spectacular” (yet not uncommon) species of news reports may produce much larger effects on systemic political orientations.

Most importantly, while all the media effects I explore in this study are in large part cumulative — in other words, it is with repeated popular engagement with patterns of hegemonic discourse that we should expect to identify the largest effects on mass opinion and political perceptions — impacts on political efficacy arguably are even more strongly shaped by long-term processes. Broad attitudes toward politics and society are less amenable to large and immediate change than are opinions toward specific government policies, political candidates and so on: they are generalized products of clusters of popular common

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<sup>40</sup> During debate over the 1981 Reagan economic plan, I coded 48.5 percent of combined television and print stories as carrying a primary focus on procedure, strategy and tactics. The comparable proportion in the welfare reform case was 40.4 percent.

sense sedimented over a lifetime of experience in the family, school, workplace and other venues — as well as through news coverage and other forms of mediated popular culture. As such, any single exposure to information or discourse is less likely to change survey responses appreciably than is the case for less familiar public policies. Better examinations of communications effects on generalized political attitudes and perceptions requires innovative and focused experimental designs specifically constructed to capture something of these complex and slowly unfolding processes.

Still, the evidence I provide does suggest that hegemonic media coverage such as that which has characterized U.S. economic and social welfare policy debates during the neoliberal era may have substantial force in dampening feelings of political agency among low- and middle-income people. As I argue in Chapters 4 through 7, presenting politics largely as a spectacle of elite gamesmanship obscures connections between government policies and people's concrete experiences, and naturalizes assumptions that the political structure is inevitably a closed system that is resistant to popular influence. My evidence here is consistent with — and yet distinct from — Jacobs and Shapiro's (2000) argument that links declines in mass political efficacy and participation in recent decades to parallel trends in declining government responsiveness to citizens' broad policy preferences — and to high-profile elites' increasing efforts to shape public opinion. Many studies have documented low (and declining) levels of political and policy knowledge, public affairs interest, participation, and subjective efficacy — along with high levels of cynicism — among Americans (e.g. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1997; Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 2002). Few scholars, however, have attempted systematic investigations of the potential sources of these attitudes in the mainstream news coverage on which most people depend for information and discourse concerning politics. None I am aware of have explored these dynamics in the specific



historical context of neoliberalism, and the accompanying rightward shift in U.S. economic and social welfare policy.

While such effects are not limited to particular social constituencies, my evidence (combined with previous research in political knowledge and engagement) suggest that the class texture of these dynamics is crucial: for lower-income citizens, not only the form (i.e. elite-focused, procedural, strategic and tactical) but also the substance (i.e. domination by neoliberal-New Right voices, ideological visions and policy approaches) of mass media coverage may suggest that “public officials don’t care much what people like me think.” As my analyses in Section V show and the Zallerian-Gramscian theoretical lens I deploy suggests, these effects may appear contradictory: many low- and middle-income people might get the general sense that their interests and values are not being represented, but when exposed to a story that does not highlight alternative voices, social visions and policy ideas, they may still register support for neoliberal-New Right policies, looking for some governmental response that may ameliorate their material conditions.

In any case, hegemonic news coverage seems to carry negative implications not only in terms of the chances that more egalitarian public policies that would reverse the declines in opportunity for poor, working class and middle-income constituencies that have accompanied neoliberalism might be enacted (i.e. policy preferences are shaped to communicate mass consent for neoliberal initiatives), but also in terms of the possibilities for cultivating popular political agency that might spur organized action by these constituencies to assert their interests and values in sustained and focused ways. These potential communication effects on political efficacy are paradigmatic examples of subtle ideological processes in the mold of Lukes’ (2005 [1974]) third dimension of power: dominant social arrangements can be protected not just through shaping people’s specific policy preferences,

but by cultivating the sense that such arrangements are inevitable or too deeply rooted to change.

But how, precisely, do the hegemonic (and potentially counter-hegemonic) frames in mass media coverage operate to shape patterns of policy opinion? Put another way, through what sub-mechanism do the articulations constructed by the voices in macro-level news discourse operate at the micro-psychological level to prompt answers to survey questions that support (or challenge) neoliberal-New Right policy prescriptions and power arrangements? The connections I have forged between political psychology research (e.g. Zaller 1992; Nelson et al. 1997) and neo-Gramscian approaches to media coverage and political discourse (e.g. Gramsci 2005 [1971]; Hall 1985) suggest that these operations occur through the *priming* of considerations, or particular fragments (and related clusters of fragments) in popular common sense. I investigate this proposition in a final empirical section.

### **IX. Priming and Popular Common Sense: Ideological Articulation at the Psychological Level**

In order to examine how news frames may prime particular notions in popular common sense — thus making audiences more likely to express certain policy preferences through survey questions — I constructed an open-ended item for experiment participants to answer immediately after responding to the post-test policy opinion question in each condition.<sup>41</sup> I based this item on a similar thought-listing probe used by Zaller (1992) in his classic work on mass attitude formation.<sup>42</sup> My logic was that the prevalence in the SH story

<sup>41</sup> Here is the question: “Quick!! Without thinking, please list in the spaces below the ideas that came to mind when you answered the last question. Don’t write complete sentences, just jot down whatever words or phrases are on your mind.”

<sup>42</sup> Unlike in my study, Zaller’s (1992) probe was fielded as part of telephone (rather than paper) surveys, where interviewers verbally supplied respondents with the prompt and took down their answers. Other researchers have used alternative tools to test the priming of considerations, such as flashing ideologically relevant words and phrases on a computer screen and then measuring how quickly participants identify them (Nelson et al. 1997).

of neoliberal-New Right voices and policy frames (and the social-political-economic visions these implied) would operate to more consistently activate (or bring to the “top of the head”) clusters of considerations that favor these conservative approaches, thus making it more likely that people in this condition would express policy support. On the other hand, participants exposed to the WH version would tend to list a more ideologically diverse and substantively balanced array of thoughts, including more fragments that advocate or positively connote egalitarian values and left-leaning policy approaches, thus leading to more opposition.<sup>43</sup>

Thus, I expected that different frequencies and types of news messages regarding a public policy issue would prime different considerations (or elements of common sense), thus making audiences more prone to evaluate the issue in light of these considerations. Moreover, as I explain in Chapter 2, research both in political psychology and in neo-Gramscian cultural studies suggests that considerations are organized in consciousness according to clusters of association: in activating a particular fragment of common sense (such as “free markets”), media discourse will tend also to activate other fragments that are linked to it in conceptual nodes (for example, “democracy”). Repeated engagement with certain systematic patterns of discourse (i.e. frequent exposure to ideologically related communications frames) — especially in contexts with few oppositional messages and

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<sup>43</sup> Some interpretive license is unavoidable in coding such responses. In general, I followed an approach very much like the one used for the content analyses in Chapters 4 and 6: I tried to understand the words and phrases that participants wrote within the concrete historical context of the debates over neoliberal-New Right economic and social welfare policy that are the focus of my study. For example, I coded the phrase “Big Oil” (which one participant listed after reading the SH story) as left-leaning because in the context of my study, it denotes a negative attitude toward corporate power and its connections to politics and public policy. On the other hand, I coded the phrase “too much government” as right-leaning: as I have stressed throughout this study, the role of state power in advancing private economic interests is a key dimension of neoliberalism that its New Right-New Democrat apologists have ideologically obscured. However, in the policy debates depicted through mainstream media in my case studies, this phrase is generally understood as an attack on progressive taxation (or taxes in general), and on the social welfare and business regulatory programs that characterized embedded liberalism.

In addition to categorizing considerations as right-leaning or left-leaning, I coded some as related to political procedure, strategy and tactics, and some as “other” (i.e. their ideological character was unclear, or they were clearly irrelevant to politics and public policy).

alternative articulations — will tend to strengthen certain mental connections and weaken or obscure alternative associations, thus leading to the construction in mass consciousness of commonly (though not universally) espoused narratives about politics and society — i.e. examples of Gramsci’s (2005 [1971]) “folklore of philosophy” — on the basis of which people will evaluate policy choices. In psychological terms, priming occurs when political discourse and information makes particular considerations more *accessible* (more easily recalled from working memory) and more *salient* (carrying greater perceived relevance).<sup>44</sup> While effects on expressed opinion will vary among people in different social locations, with different material conditions, and who tend to favor different broad social “philosophies,” engagement with news discourse over months or years that is as strongly hegemonic as was the norm during the episodes in my case studies (exemplified in the SH treatment) should produce polling results that are significantly more in favor of policies advocated by these dominant voices than they otherwise would be.

However, my experimental analyses of priming did not yield results that would be predicted by my theoretical framework: the mean numbers of right- and left-leaning considerations listed by participants assigned to the treatments did not vary consistently. In fact, results on this indicator were slightly in the opposite direction from that I predicted, although — as expected — participants in the control condition listed by far the fewest number of right- or left-leaning thoughts.<sup>45</sup> After multiple statistical analyses that yielded

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<sup>44</sup> Certainly, a concept must first be accessible for it to be salient in the context of answering a survey question. While some researchers have attempted to test the differential importance of accessibility and salience as pathways by which priming occurs (e.g. Nelson et al. 1997), I am not interested in this distinction.

<sup>45</sup> The average number of right-leaning considerations listed by those in the strong hegemonic condition was .6757. The number of these considerations listed by participants ranged from 0 to 5. For those in the WH condition, the mean was .7179, and the range was 0 to 4. For participants in the control group, the mean number of right-leaning considerations was .3684, and the range was 0 to 3.

The average number of left-leaning thoughts in the SH condition was 2.1081, and the range was 0 to 11. For those in the WH condition, the mean number of left-leaning considerations was 1.8718, and the range was 0 to 10. For participants in the control group, the average number of left-leaning thoughts was .5526, and the range was 0 to 4.

My sample is much more Democratic- and liberal-leaning than is the U.S. population as a whole. This probably explains why the mean number of left-leaning considerations that participants listed was so much larger than the mean number of

some suggestive evidence, and considerable theoretical reconsideration, I concluded that the failure to find clear empirical evidence of priming is due largely to methodological issues centered on how I coded the considerations that participants wrote after reading each news story. Qualitative analyses of specific listed thoughts suggests how I might better operationalize and examine quantitatively the activation of popular common sense in future versions of this research.

Starting with those who expressed support for the neoliberal-New Right economic policy proposal after reading the strong hegemonic news story, one low-income participant who scored relatively highly on my egalitarian values scale<sup>46</sup> and identified as a “slightly liberal” Democrat nevertheless expressed (moderate) favorability toward the proposal. Asked for her top-of-the-head thoughts, she wrote the phrases “program cuts,” “unneeded spending,” “lower taxes for all” and “help for middle class.” Thus, cuts in (presumably unnecessary) domestic government programs were articulated with tax reductions as aspects of an attractive policy plan. The word “all” connotatively signifies fairness and widespread popular benefit, which represent key fragments of American common sense. One crucial unspoken assumption here seems to be that the best way to help “all” (and especially the majority “middle class,” which is another key signifier with generally positive associations in common sense) would be to cut government spending and taxes, thus allowing economically free individuals (people and firms) to flourish in the private market. Thus, the right-wing populist discourse that dominated the news story this participant read may have played a part

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right-leaning thoughts across both treatment conditions: at the outset, study participants in this kind of sample would, on average, have more psychologically accessible and salient left-leaning thoughts than right-leaning considerations both before and after news exposure. Data comparing the partisan and ideological breakdown of my sample compared to the United States as a whole are in the Appendix.

<sup>46</sup> This person scored three out of a possible 11, where lower values indicated higher levels of egalitarianism.

in activating these elements of popular common sense in a configuration that favored the conservative policy plan.<sup>47</sup>

Other participants in the SH condition who expressed policy support appeared to exhibit considerably more ambivalence and fragmentation in their listed considerations. One person (who also reported a very low income and scored even more highly [2 out of 11] on the egalitarian value scale), wrote the phrases “tired of wealthy getting all the tax breaks,” “middle-class always gets screwed!” and “tired of struggling to get ahead.” And she offered that “Reagan had good ideas/plans that worked.” Thus, populist anger and economic frustration (in this case, directed from lower-middle income strata toward the wealthy) was articulated clearly with neoliberal-New Right policy ideas. Moreover, President Reagan “had good ideas” and “plans that worked:” this suggests that the right-wing argument that supply-side policy caused or facilitated prosperity and national rebirth during the 1980s has seeped to some extent into mass consciousness. Reagan (himself a key figure in popular common sense) is articulated here as a champion of the “middle class” — curiously, it seems, as against “the wealthy” (rather than undeserving low-income and minority populations, as is the usual narrative in New Right discourse). This participant (who, again, reported having a low income and expressed a general favorability toward economic equality, higher taxes on the wealthy, and social vs. private market approaches to policy) expressed moderate support for the conservative economic plan after being exposed to a media report in which John Boehner argues that the departure from Reaganomics is responsible for the current economic meltdown. In this case, I coded left-leaning considerations as far outnumbering

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<sup>47</sup> This person turned in a perfect score on the four-item general political knowledge test. Thus, her case also illustrates the limits of such knowledge as a moderating force in news media influence on public opinion. As I demonstrate in Section VII, possessing a higher level of existing knowledge can to some extent insulate people from the effects of hegemonic news discourse. However, knowledge of this type is no guarantee that audiences will reject messages that contradict their material and philosophical predispositions. Perhaps not coincidentally, this person provided the correct answer to just one factual question about economic and social welfare policy.

right-leaning thoughts. However, seen in context it becomes clear that phrases like “middle-class always get screwed!” were articulated with a right-wing populist icon to legitimate a policy plan that would harm the middle class: perhaps it is not the raw number of right- or left-leaning thoughts (taken in isolation) — or even the spread between the number of thoughts on each side — but the connections and *internal relationships* among considerations (as understood in historical context) that shapes policy responses.

Finally, another highly egalitarian (but this time, middle-income) participant read the SH story and appeared to be moved to vigorously counter-argue with the neoliberal-New Right voices and frames that dominated the report. Pulling no punches, she wrote: “I hate Sarah Palin,” “supply-side economics is crap,” “I’m angry and upset” and “detest this bullshit,” but also offered that “I don’t like the deal, but it’s the lesser of evils.” Despite offering such vehemently left-leaning thoughts (and no considerations that I could code as right-leaning), this person, too, expressed (moderate) support for the conservative economic plan. Seemingly, her predispositions would push her against the proposal (in addition to being of middle-income and expressing strongly egalitarian values, she identified as a liberal and a strong Democrat, as well as a labor union member). And, it appears that the SH story primed a cluster of negative associations with fragments like “supply side economics” and “Sarah Palin.” Still, this person ultimately expressed support for the conservative policy plan: it appeared to be “the lesser of evils.” Presumably, the greater evil would be government doing nothing to jumpstart the economy, since the strong hegemonic story did not express a strong left policy alternative, and certainly did not emphasize ideas that would positively push against the neoliberal trend. Thus, even someone who held a number of left-leaning considerations that were accessible enough that they apparently could be activated by reading one news story ultimately indicated favorability toward the plan. “Lesser of evils”

itself is a phrase with strong cultural resonances in American common sense: particularly in recent decades, liberal- or progressive-leaning voters often marshal this concept to explain their support for New Democrat candidates and ideas they are less than enthusiastic about. Thus, here it appears to have been the configurations of common sense that were *not* primed by the news story that led to an apparently conservative policy opinion: in the absence of a clear, constructive policy alternative, even someone with an ideological profile like this participant may communicate consent for “the lesser of evils.” In a larger sense, the sentiments she expressed may reflect the seeming impotence of left political forces in the United States under neoliberalism.

As scholars such as Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) have argued, many Americans appear to exhibit a profound distaste for political conflict — or even contentious political discussion. One middle-income participant who identified as a “slightly conservative” Republican (and expressed very strong egalitarian values) read the strong hegemonic story, expressed moderate support for the neoliberal-New Right economic policy, and simply offered the thoughts “get moving,” “too much controversy” and “name calling.” Here was someone who expressed *no* clearly right- or left-leaning thoughts at all. Rather, it appears to be a desire for “action,” for “a solution” and for an end to “controversy” that animated her expression of policy support. It is plausible that the dominant voices and interpretations in the SH story resonated with her right-leaning predispositions, even though the thought-listing item did not capture the priming of particular top-of-the-head considerations. However (despite identifying as a conservative Republican), this participant also expressed very strong egalitarian values — stating, for example, that the wealthy should pay more in taxes and preferring strong government action over private enterprise. So, again, we see deep ambivalence and contradiction (material circumstances and broad social values that push



against neoliberal-New Right approaches, partisan identification and ideological self-image that push in the opposite direction, combined with an apparently strong aversion to political conflict). But in the end, this person expressed support for the conservative policy proposal after reading a mainstream news story that was strongly hegemonic (and realistically so). In a political world suffused with such media coverage, her “consent” would simply be registered in a public opinion poll as favorability toward the policy plan.

Examining the mix of considerations listed by participants in the weak hegemonic condition offers a sense of how a more balanced and ideologically diverse news portrayal might have interacted with people’s material conditions, social values and modes of political thinking to generate policy opinion. In at least one case, exposure to this news story seems to have activated a chain of counter-hegemonically articulated associations. This “strongly liberal,” low-income woman who scored the highest on the egalitarian scale expressed strong opposition to the conservative economic plan and offered the following thoughts: “the capitalist economic system is inherently unequal,” “several weeks ago Wall Street made record profits,” “Augusto Pinochet (re: ‘free market magic’),”<sup>48</sup> “Obama — like Bush and Reagan — represents the capitalist state,” “callous disregard for poor,” “US out of Iraq/Afghanistan,” “end aid to Israel,” and “place human needs before profit.” These phrases are clear evidence for what Stuart Hall would call a resistant reading: this participant appears to understand the issues under debate from a perspective that is firmly outside the New Democrat-neoliberal-New Right consensual framework. Beginning from her material interests and social-political predispositions, this apparently committed leftist seemed to react to the discourse in the WH story by recalling from working memory a long series of

<sup>48</sup> In the experimental news stories, I depicted a Wall Street economist urging policymakers to “let the free market work its magic.” Right-wing (and U.S.-supported) Chilean Dictator Pinochet is credited in neoliberal circles with ushering in the “Miracle of Chile,” which refers to, in journalist Greg Palast’s words, “the wildly successful experiment in free markets, privatization, de-regulation and union-free economic expansion whose laissez-faire seeds spread from Valparaiso to Virginia.” (Palast 2006) Milton Friedman apparently coined the phrase.

ideologically consistent concepts in a strident counter-argument against the neoliberal policy approaches being advocated. Since this participant — with her unique configuration of material interests, social values, discursive history and political experiences (she also reported a high level of civic engagement) — did not read the strong hegemonic version of the news story, we cannot know to what extent the considerations that were activated here were due to the differences between the experimental treatments. However, the case does illustrate the proposition that considerations (or articulated fragments of common sense) are arranged in nodes and clusters (see, e.g., Taber 2003; Hall 1985): being exposed to messages about a domestic economic plan even led this participant to express foreign policy ideas that link a potentially counter-hegemonic critique of domestic political economy to a related analysis of global politics and international relations. These conceptual associations had probably been strengthened over long periods through forms of oppositional social and political engagement and exposure to alternative media discourse. Needless to say, such patterns of association are not common ones in the contemporary United States, given the political-economic forces that enframe the dominant public opinion and political information apparatuses, including the hegemonic mass media.

Another participant who expressed strong opposition to the neoliberal-New Right economic plan after reading the WH story listed an ideologically consistent string of considerations with one apparent outlier. This strongly liberal, middle-income Democrat who scored at the highest level on the egalitarianism scale (and got seven out of eight political/public policy knowledge questions right) listed: “tax cuts don’t work” and “rich get richer,” along with “problems caused by unions.” The last phrase is interesting not only because it appears to contradict the ideological thrust of the other thoughts, of this participant’s post-exposure policy opinion, and of his socioeconomic and political

predispositions, but because neither news story mentioned unions or the labor movement.<sup>49</sup> Some message or set of messages in the report appeared to prime a negative association with (perhaps specifically public-sector?) unions, which are among the chief villains in the neoliberal-New Right demonology that has been constructed in recent decades. While this participant ultimately expressed opposition to the conservative plan discussed in the story, his swipe at unions — curiously articulated with a belief in greater economic equality and a distrust of the neoliberal-New Right tax cut panacea — illustrates the power of hegemonic thinking even among those most predisposed to reject it.

A low-income conservative Republican with who scored very low on the egalitarianism scale (and exhibited very low levels of political knowledge) expressed support for the plan after reading the WH story. His listed considerations are a paradigm case of hegemonic articulation: “capitalism,” “limited government,” “free enterprise,” “more freedom” and “don’t like socialism.” Thus, exposure to the news story may have primed an array of ideologically consistent thoughts representing key fragments of American popular common sense: despite the story’s relative ideological diversity and substantive balance, this person perhaps drew on the messages that resonated with his social and political predispositions — messages that linked material conditions (the poor economy, and perhaps his own low income), to culturally powerful discursive elements, to his existing attitudes in favor of market individualism, and to a conservative policy response.

Similarly, a moderate, middle-income “pure” independent with very low levels of egalitarianism (and low levels of political knowledge) expressed moderate support for the policy plan and then listed a set of considerations that are literally mathematical in their culturally resonant internal coherence: “lower business taxes = competition,” “competition

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<sup>49</sup> Perhaps not incidentally, this participant reported that he does not belong to a union.

= better economy,” “less government interference = better economy.” It appears very unlikely that this participant would have reacted to the SH story much differently: a one-time exposure to ideologically diverse and substantively balanced news discourse probably will not prompt shifts in expressed policy opinion for someone with strong predispositions undergirded by a relatively seamless web of hegemonic associations drawn from common sense. In other words, the power of media discourse (hegemonic and otherwise) to change public opinion is limited, in the short term: shifting the apparent articulation in this participant’s consciousness of middle-income status with neoliberal-New Right-inflected fragments of popular common sense and conservative policy approaches, on the one hand, to one of middle-income status with oppositional or counter-hegemonically inflected configurations of common sense and alternative policy approaches, on the other, would likely require a long period of new social experiences and exposures to different framing patterns in communication.

This discussion underscore the complexity of the processes by which media discourse interacts with characteristics observed on the individual level to help generate public policy poll results that can have important macro-level political-economic effects. One thing that becomes clear is the need to examine listed considerations *in light of each other*, as well as in the context of the particular news story that experimental participants read. I suspect that part of the reason why my quantitative analyses did not produce the consistent associations between considerations, news treatment and post-exposure opinion I expected is that (while I did code individual considerations as right- or left-leaning in the relevant communications and historical context), I did not code these thoughts contextually as a group. In other words, articulation is manifest within the internal relations among these concepts: the psychological activation of words like “freedom” and “middle class” can have

very different ideological and political implications if they are arranged in different patterns of association with other concepts. Thus, a more promising analytical strategy may be to conduct in-depth, holistic, qualitative analyses of the considerations listed by each study participant, and then code each *set of thoughts* as “left-leaning” or “right-leaning.” I might then execute statistical analyses to try to specify the causal relationships that link priming processes to media engagement and policy opinion expression.<sup>50</sup> Thus, despite some methodological flaws, my analyses provide a platform for further research into the ways in which variably hegemonic patterns of news coverage can prime conceptual fragments, leading to the expression of popular consent in public opinion polls.

## **X. Conclusion: Media Hegemony Matters**

My evidence in this chapter offers an entry point into the causal mechanisms that connect macro-level mass media discourse to micro-level processes of opinion expression as signals of popular consent for the rightward swing in U.S. economic and social welfare policy under neoliberalism. I demonstrate that when people engage with news coverage dominated by neoliberal-New Right voices, frames and social visions, they are more likely to favor conservative policy approaches than they otherwise would be. In contrast, when people are exposed to media discourse featuring a more ideologically diverse and substantively balanced array of sources and messages, they are more likely to express policy opposition. Differences in expressed policy preferences among my study participants were largely consistent with my theoretical expectations: low- and middle-income people, and

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<sup>50</sup> Another element to consider is creating some method for assigning weights to individual considerations. There is no theoretical or substantive reason to expect that each thought activated by media exposure should have an equal effect on the expression of public opinion. In his pioneering statement in political psychology, Zaller (1992) suggested we think of priming as entailing survey respondents’ averaging their top-of-the-head conceptual fragments and then using the result to “calculate” an opinion. But I take this as a useful heuristic, rather than a definitive (or even plausible) description of what actually occurs in human consciousness. Coding listed thoughts in terms of their relative importance (for instance, in the context of individual respondents’ material and socio-political predispositions, and the context of the dominant communications environment and political culture), and then performing quantitative analyses, may lead to a better understanding of how the ideological activation of popular common sense works.

those who exhibited stronger commitments to egalitarian values, tended to favor policies that cut against these material and social predispositions when they were exposed to strongly hegemonic media depictions centered on right-wing populist articulations. After reading a news story featuring more oppositional articulations and greater policy substance, however, similar participants were more likely to oppose such policies. Pre-existing general political and policy-specific knowledge moderated the effects of news coverage: higher levels of knowledge helped to insulate people against the effects of hegemonic communications, and generally facilitated the reception of critical frames and policy information.

The experimental analyses provide somewhat weaker — yet intriguing — evidence that strongly hegemonic news discourse dominated by official government sources and emphasizing depictions of politics as a strategic spectacle dampens feelings of political agency among low- and middle-income people. And my investigation of priming offers some suggestive evidence that the sub-mechanism through which such opinion effects occur may be the activation of clusters of culturally resonant fragments of popular common sense — “considerations,” in Zaller’s (1992) terminology — that are linked in plausible ways with material circumstances and public policy issues. While my small sample size precludes meaningful regression analyses of many causal relationships, results from other statistical tests indicate fairly powerful and consistent effects. Moreover, random assignment to experimental treatments greatly minimizes the potential for spurious causality, reducing concerns about limited evidence from more sophisticated multivariate analyses.

There are several important limitations to this phase of my study. As discussed above, the considerations probe was probably not designed optimally to firmly capture the

complex processes involved in priming effects.<sup>51</sup> In the next iteration of the project, I will also include television treatments modeled on evening network news reports in order to compare the differential effects on mass policy opinion of print vs. visual depictions: as I discuss in Chapter 3, previous research suggests that certain formal and substantive characteristics of TV news may intensify the influence of hegemonic discourse. And a larger and more representative sample would allow more precise and externally valid statistical analyses of the differential roles of various audience and message characteristics in shaping hegemonic effects on public opinion.

Still, my results provide a strong evidentiary basis for the proposition that hegemonic news media — through its effects on opinion poll results — has been an important factor in cultivating popular consent for the major rightward shift in political-economic understandings and policy arrangements during the neoliberal era. Most of the quantitative analyses I conducted indicate strong and consistent patterns of opinion change in response to the treatments. Moreover, my sample was much more Democratic- and liberal-identifying — and, because it is weighted toward higher levels of socioeconomic status, was more politically knowledgeable — than is the U.S. population as a whole. This suggests that the effects of the strong hegemonic story would probably be considerably magnified in a demographically representative sample. And this experiment identified substantial opinion-shaping dynamics through one-shot news exposures: in light of my case study evidence showing that consistently hegemonic patterns have characterized actual media coverage of economic and social welfare policy, we can imagine that effects like those I demonstrate will be cumulative outside the experimental setting: for example, if reading a typical mainstream

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<sup>51</sup> In the future, I may also conduct a qualitative, focus group-like discussion with a small, randomly selected subset of participants in order to elicit in more detail their responses to the media discourse I presented during the experiment, and their relevant personal experiences. This should allow me to better discuss my quantitative findings in concrete social and historical context.

news story just once can cause low- and middle-income people to double their reported support for a neoliberal economic plan, effects on poll results might be considerably stronger in an environment where such reports consistently outnumber more ideologically diverse and balanced portrayals by ratios of two- or three-to-one.

This experiment is an especially valuable supplement to my case study evidence because of its unusual mixture of internal and external validity. The combined between- and within-subjects design helped me to assess the multidimensional causal relationships involved in hegemonic media influence by using the technique of random assignment to “decompose a complex phenomenon.” (Kinder and Palfrey 1993: 7) While — like most variables that are quantified at the individual level, such as income, partisanship and political knowledge — the process of articulation is a *social* one, that process does entail micro-psychological dynamics that experiments can help specify, so long as these dynamics are not reduced to purely individual phenomena. And employing a sample that is more representative of the population that concerns me than is usual for similar experiments — along with using ultra-realistic news treatments — provided a solid foundation from which to generalize my results to U.S. mainstream media coverage and policy opinion during the neoliberal era. My work suggests that carefully designed experiments can be an effective instrument for explaining — and demystifying — concrete power-laden historical phenomena that interest critically oriented scholars, and that affect material conditions and socio-political opportunities for millions of people.



## Chapter 9 -- Looking Forward: Mass Media, Public Policy and Democratic Praxis

### I. Introduction: “Plus ca Change...”

In an op-ed piece published in July 2010, Heritage Foundation scholars Robert Rector and Chuck Donovan lamented the failure of the 1996 welfare law to produce the fundamental change that conservatives had hoped for when President Clinton signed it. They decried the increased emergency anti-poverty spending that the recent federal stimulus plan had allocated to states facing massive unemployment in the wake of the Great Recession. They called for extending neoliberal “reforms” to the nearly 70 other means-tested federal programs — including food stamps and subsidized housing assistance — capping total spending, spreading the gospel of marriage to low-income communities, and converting federal benefits into loans under a new model of “reciprocal obligation.” As they put it in the piece distributed to newspapers across the country: “This approach also would rescue the able-bodied poor from a clear moral hazard. Right now, they're passive beneficiaries as government compels their fellow citizens, the taxpayers, to make outright grants with minimal expectations attached. A gift is good, but a reciprocal obligation would restore dignity and build character.”<sup>1</sup>

Responding to increased demands for assistance from workers and low-income families during the economic slump, several states have also moved to use the “flexibility” that PRWORA afforded them to place additional limits on eligibility for cash welfare, food stamps and other programs. Mandatory drug-testing for applicants and recipients has recently been enacted or is being considered in South Dakota, Missouri, New York and

<sup>1</sup> “It's Time for Another Run at Welfare Reform.” (July 16, 2010). Available through the Heritage Foundation's online archives.

other states. A Kentucky legislator has proposed a plan to require drug testing for anyone receiving welfare, food stamps, Medicaid or other assistance, with immediate loss of benefits for failing a test. And in Oregon, state officials would apply such policies even to laid-off workers seeking unemployment insurance benefits (Kenyon 2011).<sup>2</sup> Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-UT, has proposed that the federal government mandate similar conditions for welfare and unemployment. According to the Center on Law and Social Policy and the American Civil Liberties Union, there is no credible evidence that people who receive government benefits are more likely than other adults to use illegal drugs. Moreover, the tests that would be deployed are almost always effective only in detecting marijuana use — including use that occurred weeks or months before the test — and cannot identify the use of alcohol or prescription drugs, whose individual and social effects have been found to be at least as serious (ibid; Lewis and Kenefick 2011). Official proponents have made it clear that such neoliberal-paternalist restrictions would have the salutary effect of reducing government costs by cutting the benefits rolls and discouraging people from applying (Kenyon 2011). This suggests that these recent moves to restrict social provision follow the familiar historical pattern of drawing on individualistic-moralistic discourses in the popular imagination to support business power by lowering taxes and improving employers' bargaining position (Piven and Cloward 1993 [1971]).

Nearly 15 years after Clinton and his New Democrat allies declared that signing welfare reform would take the political albatross of cash benefits for the poor off their party's shoulders, most signs point to just the opposite.<sup>3</sup> With state revenues taking a

<sup>2</sup> The title of this piece ("Can NY Afford Drug Tests for Welfare Recipients?") operates hegemonically to suggest that the cost to "taxpayers" of such policies — rather than their effectiveness in combating dangerous addictions or their class fairness and consistency with fundamental privacy rights — is the primary concern.

<sup>3</sup> In endorsing PRWORA, Clinton proclaimed, "after I sign my name to this bill, welfare will no longer be a political issue." As I note in Chapter 6, similar claims were rife among neoliberal apologists for the move. Even conservative intellectual Lawrence Mead argued that in the wake of reform, "politics probably would revert to progressive themes and shift to the

pounding under the impact of America's most severe economic downturn since the Great Depression — a downturn that was precipitated in no small part by the financial manipulations encouraged by decades of neoliberal policy (Phillips 2008) — and with the New Right continuing to exert political pressure for federal budget austerity through the pseudo-grassroots Tea Party (Williamson et al. 2011), elements of the New Deal-Great Society welfare state face increasingly bold challenge.<sup>4</sup> In December 2010, President Obama agreed to leave in place (ostensibly, on a temporary basis) the regressive tax cuts passed under the George W. Bush administration, cuts modeled on the neoliberal-supply side theories first instantiated in the Reagan economic plan that itself preceded welfare reform by 15 years (Wolf 2010).<sup>5</sup> A month later, Obama proposed during his State of the Union address to lower the corporate tax rate. This means that the massive fiscal and political pressures that were first locked in place with the 1981 policy shift — pressures that were designed to, in the words of New Right operative Grover Norquist, reduce the liberal state to a size at which conservatives “can drown it in the bathtub” (Hacker and Pierson 2005b: 33) — will likely only intensify. Social Security and Medicare are clearly the next targets for

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left.” (Soss and Schram 2007: 101) Wilentz (2008: 364-7) endorses this conventional wisdom by noting the inability of Republicans to use the welfare issue against the president in the 1996 election, and cites statistics showing that official poverty rates declined by 25 percent during the Clinton years. Those years coincided with a brief period of economic expansion during which lower- and middle-income people's standard of living made up a small share of the ground lost earlier in the neoliberal era (Baker 2007), and Wilentz offers no evidence that the moderately improving condition of the non-affluent during the 1990s was due to welfare reform. Martin and Caminada (2011) show that most people who began working for wages because of PRWORA had earnings below the poverty level even many years later. And the law's administrative structure has made it difficult to reliably chart its “success” according to indicators other than the number of people who stopped receiving aid.

Moreover, based on careful statistical analyses, Soss and Schram (2007) found that enactment of PRWORA did not significantly impact negative — and highly racialized — popular attitudes toward the poor, or the association of “welfare dependency” with the Democratic Party. Central to the authors' interpretations of these findings is the proposition that in the case of policies (like welfare) that most people do not experience directly and explicitly, “public perceptions will depend more heavily on elite rhetoric, media frames, and widely held cultural beliefs.” (ibid: 113) My evidence in Chapters 6 and 7 validates this theoretical speculation.

<sup>4</sup> For fascinating — and troubling — evidence drawn from interviews with local Tea Party activists demonstrating the continued force of the neoliberal-friendly cultural-ideological distinction between “work” and “non-work” that I explore in Chapter 7, see Williamson et al. (2011).

<sup>5</sup> While the president's deal with Republican congressional leaders included extending unemployment benefits and payroll tax cuts that would help lower- and middle-income people, it also entailed *lowering* the federal estate tax rate to a level below even that included in the original 2001 Bush administration-backed plan, as well as increasing the value of assets that the wealthy could shield from this tax (Wolf 2011).

the neoliberal wave, as lawmakers weigh proposals from the president's bipartisan National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Reform. Indeed, the fiscal 2012 budget plan recently released by the GOP leadership in the House of Representatives proposes turning Medicaid over to the states in the form of block grants and phasing in a private voucher-like system for Medicare under which seniors would receive partial government subsidies to purchase health insurance from private companies (Hennessey 2011): these moves would go a long way toward "ending Medicaid and Medicare as we know (them)."

Efforts to deploy the organs of mass communication to shape public opinion in ways that facilitate the neoliberal-New Right hegemonic project also continue unabated. Conservative intellectuals have spent years developing arguments and stratagems to parry initial victories into successively aggressive attempts to reorient the American state. Both tax cuts (Morgan 2007; Pierson 2007) and the campaign to reshape welfare have been major dimensions of this effort: Heritage Foundation scholar Jeffrey Gayner was explicit in describing the strategic construction of the Contract With America:

By dealing initially with popular items...the Contract engendered popular momentum that could eventually lead to confronting more contentious issues, such as environmental regulations and Medicare and Medicaid reforms...Ultimately, the government should cease many of its activities; but what is necessary now is a realistic transitional mechanism to achieve that goal.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, early successes at generating signs of public support for supply-side tax policy and budget austerity targeting assistance for the marginal poor was meant to leverage challenges to programs with more broadly and deeply rooted popular backing. While the future remains unwritten, my evidence suggests strongly that, so far, these efforts — aided by a largely complicit mainstream media apparatus — have been substantially effective in helping both to change the contours of major aspects of U.S. economic and social welfare policy, and in

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<sup>6</sup> Jeffrey B. Gayner. "The Contract With America: Implementing New Ideas in the U.S." (October 12, 1995). Available through the Heritage Foundation's online archives.

reshaping the political communications climate to facilitate the construction of popular consent for neoliberalism as shepherded by the New Right.

## **II. Media Hegemony: The Evidence**

My rigorous content analyses of television and print news during key policymaking episodes across the neoliberal era provides strong evidence that hegemonic mass media coverage has played a significant role in changing the U.S. political environment to benefit the New Right economic and social welfare policy agenda. Through quantitative examination of mainstream news during debate over the Reagan tax and budget plan of 1981 and over welfare reform in 1995-1996 (reported in Chapters 4 and 6, respectively), I demonstrate that broadly right-of-center sources and messages significantly out-numbered critical alternatives. In both cases, approximately 70 percent of the clearly valenced messages that were attributed to (named or unnamed) sources in mainstream media advocated conservative positions in line with neoliberal political-economic imperatives. In addition, the number of TV and newspaper stories favoring the right side of these policy questions outnumbered the number slanted toward the left by ratios of about four-to-one in the first episode and more than five-to-one in the second.

Moreover, in both cases official government sources dominated news coverage, comprising 80 percent to 90 percent of all voices that mass media audiences heard during these historic debates over taxes and welfare. In addition, procedural, strategic and tactical dimensions of politics were a pervasive theme for mainstream news outlets: these frames made up 40 percent of all individual source-messages during the 1981 episode and nearly 33 percent during the 1995-1996 debate, while stories focused on such aspects comprised nearly half the total in the first case and more than 40 percent in the second. In contrast, mainstream media circulated very little concrete factual information about the design or

likely effects of these neoliberal policy proposals. For example, audiences were rarely informed about the significant upper-class skew of the 1981 tax plan as seen in the relative percentages of financial benefits that would flow to various income categories, and were exposed even less often to information about the role of Social Security and Medicare payroll deductions in the total tax obligations of different income strata. Similar patterns obtained during the 1995-1996 case: network TV watchers and *USA Today* readers received information on the racial breakdown of the AFDC rolls just three times over 20 months, and just once did mainstream media report the (miniscule) percentage of federal spending that was devoted to welfare.

In Chapters 5 and 7, I showed that oppositional perspectives were available in political discourse during the periods surrounding both policy episodes. However, mass media outlets were cued overwhelmingly by voices (in the second case, from *both* major political parties) that advanced policy ideas and related social visions clearly within the neoliberal elite consensus. The frames that these actors disseminated captured and refocused key dimensions of American popular common sense to support a conservative reorientation of economic and social welfare policy toward the valorization of private markets animated by possessive individualism. In both cases — but most centrally during the welfare reform debate — these fragments were further articulated with gendered, sexualized and racialized understandings that served to harden social animosities and, thus, to defuse potential political challenges to the neoliberal-New Right shift. Furthermore, I demonstrated that mainstream media itself played a more direct role in marginalizing dissent by simultaneously: 1) depicting a mass consensus in favor of supply-side tax cuts, rollbacks in social and business regulatory spending, and severe restrictions and limitations on welfare benefits, and 2) portraying political elites — most of whom were operating either firmly or uneasily within

the neoliberal consensus — as engaged in bitter conflict. In sum, news coverage was positioned to generate mass consent for the right turn both by shaping poll responses on specific policy questions, and by cultivating generalized attitudes that militated against popular political knowledge and participation.

In Chapter 8, I demonstrated that hegemonic media coverage of this sort can, indeed, shape mass policy opinion and political perceptions through the psychological mechanism of framing. In an unusual experiment designed to maximize both internal and external validity, I showed that reading realistic news stories based closely on the findings from my case studies can prompt low- and middle-income people, as well as those who exhibit egalitarian socioeconomic value orientations, to express support for neoliberal-New Right policies. However, when such people read similarly realistic news reports with more ideological diversity and more non-governmental sources, their opinions tended to move significantly against these policy initiatives. I also offered tentative evidence that hegemonic media coverage can dampen feelings of political efficacy among lower-status constituencies, thus making public affairs appear more confusing and more resistant to popular attempts to influence policy. In sum, my experimental results suggest that less strongly hegemonic patterns of news coverage would produce very different poll results during debates over neoliberal-New Right policy proposals.

Overall, my empirical findings are consistent with the proposition that surveys showing broad popular support for the 1981 Reagan economic plan and for the neoliberal reform of welfare that occurred in 1996 were in significant measure the product of mass communications processes that Page and Shapiro (1992) would label “elite manipulation” of public opinion: i.e., in Zaller’s (1992: 313) words, “a situation in which elites induce citizens to hold opinions they would not hold if they were aware of the best available information

and analysis.” I suggest that the “best available information and analysis” in both these cases would have comprised: 1) a larger measure of oppositional messages from left-liberal Democratic Party voices, 2) a greater volume of substantive (as opposed to procedural, strategic and tactical) coverage, including much more frequent reporting of key pieces of concrete policy information, and 3) much greater coverage of potentially counter-hegemonic frames originating outside official government circles, such as the social-democratic ideas represented by Michael Harrington in Chapter 5, and the perspectives of the welfare-rights movement I analyzed in Chapter 7.

Mainstream media in both cases did include a substantial volume of messages criticizing the neoliberal-New Right policies that were enacted in 1981 and 1996. And neo-Gramscian theories of mass media as an organ of ideological hegemony would suggest no different: hegemony is neither a seamless web of dominant understandings, nor is it primarily the product of a conspiracy to deliberately inculcate such understandings in popular constituencies. Rather, hegemony refers to a set of processes that rely on an ensemble of economic and cultural pressures to present a worldview that responds to popular needs and values but does so in very limited ways that support prevailing power relations and the leading social forces that benefit from them.

In the mass communication context, then, hegemony is neither an airtight system of indoctrination nor (in the main) a product of tightly organized efforts involving journalists, political elites and other actors. Hegemony involves the propagation through news outlets of a set of messages cultivating social views and political preferences that support dominant arrangements. Some opposition, however, is usually manifest — so long as it is limited and channeled in ways that dampen its political threat: for example (as I showed in Chapter 7), TV news outlets did tell viewers that left-of-center social movement organizations opposed



neoliberal welfare reform, but they did so only after Clinton had announced he would sign PRWORA, and they offered very little substantive coverage of movement perspectives and goals. And during the 1981 episode, mass media did circulate the views of liberal Democrats in Congress, but at much lower frequencies than the messages of Reagan and his New Right allies. Moreover, news outlets in this case virtually ignored critical perspectives from outside the New Deal-Great Society framework — messages that, I argue, carried greater potential to mobilize opposition (including by shaping poll results) because they more effectively and creatively reconfigured culturally resonant elements of common sense in ways that might have articulated popular interests and identities to oppose the neoliberal turn. Overall, I offer strong evidence for the operation of hegemonic communication processes to shape popular consent: working through mass media, elite actors were able (in the positive ideological register) to construct social visions that support neoliberal imperatives, and (in the negative register) to narrow the discourse that mass publics had effective access to in expressing their perceptions and policy preferences.

Certainly, the knowledge produced by these findings — like that produced by all social science — is fallible, and my study has conceptual and empirical limitations. While my experiment provides promising evidence of the confluence of hegemonic opinion-shaping mechanisms at the macro-social and micro-individual levels, its small sample size precluded precise analyses of key causal dynamics through multivariate regression. In addition, my case studies did not include quantitative analyses of elite discourse as represented in congressional debate, so my depiction of official Democratic positions — and their relationship to mass media coverage — is less than optimal. Moreover, research design and data limitations mean I cannot conclude that hegemonic media coverage actually shaped the opinion poll results that I report in my case studies. Finally, the intensive methodological approach I chose made

analyses of more than two policy episodes not practically feasible. Thus, I can only tentatively generalize the mass communications dynamics I uncover to other cases during the rise of the New Right under neoliberalism. In Section VI, I discuss some of the more general patterns of political communication that my findings suggest may be operative across several cases during this historical period.<sup>7</sup>

Still, the preponderance of evidence in my study — collected and analyzed through a variety of systematic quantitative and qualitative techniques — its interpretation through a compatible set of theoretical frameworks drawn from social scientific and critical-cultural approaches to mass media, and its integration with carefully documented political and policy histories suggest that I have begun to fill a crucial gap in our understanding of the political impetus for the major reconfiguration of material resources and social power that has occurred under neoliberalism.

### **III. News Coverage and the Right Turn**

My evidence both complements and complicates previous accounts of the rightward shift in U.S. economic and social welfare policy over the last several decades. Before engaging this literature in some detail, however, it may be useful — now that I have presented empirical findings and elaborated my conceptual argument over the previous five chapters — to crystallize my position on what exactly has constituted this conservative shift. I suggest that the most fruitful analytic frame for examining the role of mass opinion during this period of major policy change focuses not so much on a realignment of partisan power

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<sup>7</sup> As I discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, critical-realist approaches caution against sweeping generalizations that abstract inappropriately from historical context. As Sayer (2010 [1984: 100-101]) writes, “even in understanding our own contemporary society we must be aware of what is or isn’t historically specific. Labour is a genuinely transhistorical necessary condition of human existence, but as such it cannot be treated as sufficient to explain concrete work-related practices in particular societies, such as the need to find a job in capitalism.”

to favor Republicans, but rather on a broader *ideological* recalibration that has affected both major parties under the influence of neoliberalization.

I propose that a set of culturally resonant pro-business intellectual legitimations that had been developed, updated and elaborated by conservative voices over many decades were, beginning in the 1970s, taken up by key elites in political and civil society — at first, mostly in or connected to the Republican Party. These messages were filtered through venues of popular ideological formulation — including the mass media — and were effective to varying degrees in shaping public opinion (and, probably, in aiding the election of conservative policymakers). Simultaneously, key elements within the national Democratic Party (centered on the Democratic Leadership Council) began responding both to this apparent shift in “public mood” (as seen in polling and election results) and to more direct structural pressures exerted by business interests through campaign finance and lobbying dynamics (Ferguson and Rogers 1986; Hacker and Pierson 2010) by moving to the right on many economic and social welfare issues. Over time, the national Republican Party came under the nearly unchallenged leadership of strongly pro-corporate elements broadly supportive of the neoliberal shift and yoked in an uneasy — yet, I argue, very effective — alliance with rising socially conservative forces centered on the Christian right. Meanwhile, Democratic elites continued adapting to what they perceived as the twin political-economic inevitabilities of popular conservatism and the imperatives of globalizing markets in an attempt to present an alternative to the left of the Republicans that would conform to the ideological pressures of neoliberalization.

This has resulted in a scenario that is best described as a broad elite-level neoliberal consensus on economic and social welfare policy under the leadership of the New Right. As Piven (2007: 151) writes, “the real measure of the political success of the (pro-business)

campaign was its influence on the Democratic Party, which had, for all its internal conflicts, and however reluctantly, championed the policies of the New Deal-Great Society period.” To be sure, the terms and emphases of that consensus have shifted somewhat depending on which party controls the White House and Congress, and partisan alternations certainly make a significant difference for ordinary Americans’ concrete economic and social conditions (Bartels 2008). But even during the Clinton administration, it is not implausible to suggest that Democrats acted more or less as a junior governing partner in a coalition led by the New Right: as I showed in Chapters 6 and 7, New Democrats’ welfare rhetoric was a bit softer and their policy proposals somewhat less harsh than those of their more conservative counterparts, but their basic policy perspectives and priorities were squarely in line with the business-friendly neoliberal framework.<sup>8</sup>

How elements of the broader political environment — including pre-existing public policies, institutional arrangements, elite discourse and news coverage — have shaped mass opinion during the right turn in U.S. economic and social welfare policy has drawn surprisingly little scholarly interest.<sup>9</sup> As Jacobs and Skocpol (2005: 219) write in surveying empirical accounts of the rise in economic inequality that has occurred during this period, “behavioralist research needs to take a questioning stance toward assumptions that citizens are autonomous first-movers...The formation of public opinion is one of the most important and understudied areas of research on democratic life.” Systematic investigations of news content and its potential effects on popular opinion in this historical context have

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<sup>8</sup> There is little doubt that the administration responded to perceived political realities in the wake of the GOP’s 1994 takeover of Congress to “triangulate” its domestic policy positions by moving somewhat to the right. But even Clinton’s emblematic first-term socioeconomic policy attempt — the ill-fated drive for national health care — bears key traces of neoliberal influence in immediately foreclosing the possibility of a thoroughly socialized system (such as a single-payer approach), instead reconciling with the configuration of (primarily business, professional and upper-income) interests who backed continued private market provision (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Moreover, on many explicitly economic issues — welfare chief among them — Clinton and most of his advisors and cabinet officials (especially those who served after 1994) had for years operated within the neoliberal orbit.

<sup>9</sup> For exceptions, see Hacker and Pierson (2005a, 2005b); Soss and Schram (2007).

been especially rare. More often, scholars treat media coverage as a background phenomenon: news articles are a source for descriptions of policy debates or a way to add color to case histories. In some studies, elite rhetoric and news coverage are fingered as potentially politically consequential influences (e.g. Hacker and Pierson 2005a: 156), but such leads are rarely followed in focused ways. In these respects, my project is significant because it does something that others in political science have not attempted on this scale: I carefully specify the contours of U.S. media coverage and official discourse in key policymaking episodes during the right turn, deploy a methodological and conceptual framework focused on how mass communications can operate ideologically to influence popular sentiment, and explore empirically the causal impact of such coverage on public opinion.

Thus, my study suggests that scholars who are interested in understanding the right turn in public policy must be more willing to treat the mass opinion expressed in surveys as thoroughly enfolded within broader political and economic contexts. Crucially, most Americans experience these contexts centrally (though not exclusively) through media coverage. As Jacobs and Skocpol (2005: 219) argue and as others (e.g. Jacobs and Shapiro 2000) have eloquently stated, the idea that policymakers democratically respond to “authentic” mass sentiment remains a largely unquestioned, normatively driven presupposition that has hamstrung mainstream empirical research in American politics (see, e.g., Erikson et al. 2006 [2002]; Fishkin 1995; Quirk and Hinchliffe 1998). On a parallel track, my work suggests that policy scholars of the right turn should abandon equally problematic assumptions that news media constitute a more or less ideologically neutral transmission belt for the messages of “political” actors (elite or otherwise): as I explain in Section VI, there is a rich and growing literature in mass communication studies that theorizes and empirically demonstrates the ways in which media itself is a *political* — and

thus, necessarily, an economic — institution whose operations have crucial political-economic consequences.

The aggregate poll numbers that result from the answers people supply to survey questions during specific public policy debates are powerful political weapons for elite actors who seek to associate their plans with a measure of democratic legitimacy. These poll results are one crucial (albeit not the only) mechanism through which popular consent for public policies is registered. This project is a small positive step, but we need to know a great deal more about how, precisely, such consent has been achieved in the context of the right turn. My study suggests that explanations of these processes that sideline the role of mass media and elite discourse (flowing from inside and outside the formal state apparatus) fall short of the mark: as Jacobs and Skocpol (2005: 219) put it, “what we need...are studies that analyze the overall process of public opinion formation in ways that integrate these discrete influences; and such synthetic studies must spell out implications for the workings of representative democracy.”

A close focus on elite discourse, mass media and public opinion also might lead us to question some bits of common academic and popular wisdom about the relative “success” of the right turn and the factors that have facilitated that success. For example, scholars like Jacob Hacker (2004) have insightfully pointed to the ways in which conservative forces, apparently rebuffed in their direct attempts to reorient the domestic state toward market arrangements and business imperatives, have turned instead to “subterranean” strategies where elites and powerful interests can operate relatively untethered from countervailing democratic influences. Thus, arcane administrative rule changes that attract little public notice can, over time, cumulate to major policy shifts. Or, in a dynamic that Hacker (2004) terms “policy drift,” state managers can neglect to update programs to cope with changing

economic and social conditions (the loss of real value in the minimum wage is perhaps the most consequential example of this in the economic policy context). But the assumption in some of these accounts seems to be that the neoliberal-New Right has generally been thwarted during non-“subterranean” policymaking episodes: in situations where there is formalized, high-profile legislative debate, a wider variety of pressure groups and policy voices are afforded seats at the table, political elites inform their constituents about attacks on cherished programs, and media plays its democratic role of raising awareness so citizens can hold leaders accountable for policies that go against their values and interests.

But my evidence suggests that in key cases, such “frontal assaults” on the remnants of New Deal-embedded liberal policies have actually been spectacularly effective, and in no small part because they were *not* “subterranean” efforts: in these instances, I suggest, the confluence of political-economic interests that have driven neoliberalization has operated to substantially remake mainstream media itself into a powerful force helping to move U.S. economic and social welfare policy to the right.<sup>10</sup> While scholars have perceptively noted the disjuncture between “pragmatic-egalitarian” mass opinion as expressed in responses to general questions about government social spending, regulation and taxation, on the one hand, and the elite-level conservative turn, on the other (e.g. Hacker and Pierson 2005b; Page and Jacobs 2009), most have paid less attention to public opinion on specific policy issues during high-visibility public debates. In these cases, as I demonstrate in the present study and elsewhere (Guardino 2007), majority opinion appears to have been largely *consistent* with neoliberal-New Right positions. Focusing on the role of news coverage and elite discourse in such episodes shows that not only have conservative forces often ignored or marginalized mass opinion that does not comply with their imperatives (see, e.g., Hacker and

<sup>10</sup> Soss et al. (2009: 13) also identify the changes in poverty governance entailed in neoliberal welfare reform as a key exception to the “subterranean” policy change thesis, but they do not explore the role of media coverage and mass opinion.

Pierson 2005a, 2005b), but they may at times have been incredibly effective in *shaping* opinion in order to democratically justify major policy moves.

As I noted in Chapter 2, such impacts on poll results need not be quantitatively massive to be politically consequential. Even a shift of 15 or 20 percentage points in aggregate support for a policy over a period of eight or 10 months could make a significant difference: for example, polls showing 42 percent in favor and 38 percent opposed to the 2001 Bush tax plan send very different political signals than those showing 67 percent support and 27 percent opposition after just three months of hegemonic media coverage (Guardino 2007). While — in the absence of consistent reinforcement like that I suggest has probably occurred through media coverage over recent decades — framing effects may decay, even short-lived impacts can be useful to actors seeking to cultivate a favorable political climate for policy action (or, as the case often has been during the rise of the New Right, policy action through inaction): it may make little difference if polling results begin to turn against a policy like the Reagan economic plan after it has been enacted: for a variety of institutional reasons, major U.S. national policies are notoriously difficult to reverse through statute. And as I argue below, even if Congress repeals policies or the Supreme Court strikes them down, their material, political and ideological effects are rarely fully reversed. Finally, even if hegemonic media coverage does not significantly affect polling results in a particular case, we have evidence that governing elites and other political actors (particularly members of Congress) rely on news content itself as a gauge of “public opinion” (Jacobs et al. 1998): to the extent that mainstream media ideologically construct a limited range of debate — in part, as I showed through my analyses of the Reagan “mandate” and of welfare recipients as pro-neoliberal reform in Chapters 5 and 7, by imputing preferences to “the public” — elites



who are wavering on a particular policy question might take the “political climate” they glean from the media as a signal of which way to vote.

Yet another dimension of my focused analyses of elite discourse, media coverage, mass opinion and their complex interrelations with concrete public policies suggests that the neoliberal-New Right offensive has been more effective than is often supposed. Some analysts have concluded that the conservative turn has failed because the size, cost and — in some arenas — the power and authority of the U.S. national government have not been appreciably limited since 1980. These interpretations, however, miss the mark: close attention to the political dynamics and ideological legitimations surrounding tax and welfare policy suggests that the goal of modern conservatives has been less to tame the federal government per se, than to *reorient* national-level state apparatuses and redeploy them to neoliberal-New Right purposes: as Soss et al. (2009: 15) put it, “the key developments have not occurred along the quantitative dimension of more versus less state intervention. They have centered on how the state is intervening, for what purposes, and for whose benefit.”

Both the 1981 Reagan economic plan (as well as business and upper-income tax cuts in general, such as those in the 2001 and 2003 plans enacted under the George W. Bush regime) and welfare reform illustrate this key point clearly. As I argue based on comparisons of hegemonic discourse to concrete policy features in Chapter 7, and as others have suggested (Smith 2007; Soss et al. 2009), welfare reform was less a project to roll back the state as it was a move to redirect its considerable power and authority to discipline poor single women and working people. Thus, the fact that PRWORA did not entail immediate decreases in government spending is not necessarily evidence for the failure of neoliberal-New Right forces. In the case of tax policy, while many elements of the Reagan cuts (as well as some aspects of the 1981 cuts in domestic spending) were later statutorily reversed, this

does not mean that the original policy moves were a political dud. Massive amounts of material resources were transferred from broad public purposes and lower- and middle-income people to sectors of concentrated private wealth. The federal budget deficit (aided by Reagan's redeployment of state resources to military purposes and allied corporate interests) exploded, generating strong fiscal and political pressures for further domestic cuts, and — crucially — relegating liberal-left forces mostly to reactive defense of existing programs rather than proactive efforts to multiply and improve social protections. This is one way in which the concrete agenda for economic and social welfare policy has been altered to comply with neoliberal imperatives. And — most centrally for my analytic purposes — the contours of mainstream public *discourse* (i.e., what policy messages are considered “politically acceptable”) shifted significantly to the right. Changes like this cannot be simply reversed through legislation: as Pierson (2004) and other theorists have argued, new policies, institutional arrangements — and, I suggest, patterns of political discourse — are layered on existing ones, and actors cannot remake political-economic arrangements out of whole cloth.

We can see many of these forces play out in the Clinton administration's fiscal and economic policy response to 12 years of Republican control of the executive branch: the president placed a heavy focus on eliminating the deficits that ballooned during the 1980s (Meeropol 1998), and he legitimated these moves through a conservative anti-state rhetoric bearing unmistakable traces of Reaganism.<sup>11</sup> My key point is that we are likely to miss the signs of neoliberal-New Right political-economic ascendance if we do not pay close attention to concrete policy designs and to the elite discourse and hegemonic media coverage that operate ideologically to simultaneously legitimate and obscure these arcane — yet materially consequential — details.

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<sup>11</sup> These deficit-reduction efforts were ultimately successful, but only briefly, until another round of big supply-side tax cuts and military spending hikes went into effect under George W. Bush.

Not incidentally, most major episodes of non-“subterranean” economic and social welfare policymaking from 1980 through 2008 (at least) have by the eve of their enactments entailed majority public support for the neoliberal-New Right position as expressed in contemporary surveys probing opinion on the specific policies at issue. The key exception — President Bush’s stalled campaign to begin privatizing Social Security in 2005 — is instructive from the standpoint of elite discourse and media coverage. Despite a vigorous public relations campaign (which included a major effort to harness the federal bureaucracy’s communications apparatus to push a clearly ideological message [Guardino 2006]) undergirded by years of intellectual arguments about the program’s impending “bankruptcy” — and despite a bicameral Republican congressional majority — the administration and its right-wing allies apparently were unable to shift public opinion appreciably in their favor, and the policy drive fizzled before reaching legislative hearings. While I am not aware of any systematic media content analyses for this episode comparable to those I provide in this study, it is reasonable to speculate that mainstream news coverage was not nearly so favorable to the neoliberal push on Social Security as it had been on previous issues.

Two factors immediately stand out as candidates for explaining why conservative forces were unable to move polling results in the Social Security case: 1) they faced one of the few remaining left-of-center interest groups (AARP) that was not only backed by a relatively politically aware and active social constituency — and a formidable resource base from which to launch its own advertising campaign against the Bush agenda (Hacker and Pierson 2005b) — but was one of the few organizations of its kind that mainstream media outlets consider to be a credible non-governmental voice, and 2) they targeted a program whose benefits large numbers of people either experience directly or are aware of through relatives and friends (Campbell 2002): as I suggest in Chapter 2, popular common sense on

Social Security — as compared to that on other economic and social welfare policies — is probably to a much greater extent the product of widespread concrete socialization experiences that are difficult for elite and media discourse to undermine.

The 2005 privatization episode illustrates the importance of progressive non-governmental groups not only in influencing policy through electoral mobilization, protest tactics and institutional lobbying, but also in operating as incubators for potentially counter-hegemonic opinionation processes and serving as voices that can command substantive platforms in the news. In this connection, while the U.S. labor movement has been largely decimated in the years since Reagan broke the air-traffic controllers strike, the historic uprisings against social austerity led by public-sector unions this year in Wisconsin and other Midwestern states may signal growing efforts to stem the neoliberal-New Right wave (Rothschild 2011).<sup>12</sup> In light of mainstream media's general tendency to cover social movements sparsely and negatively (McLeod and Hertog 1992; Wittebols 1996), it will be interesting to learn the findings from future content analyses centered on these state-level policy episodes.

However, the failure of the neoliberal-New Right on Social Security reform during the Bush administration does not mean that the broad conservative policy push is over, nor that elite discourse and hegemonic media coverage may not in the future be effective in generating popular consent for privatization: social and political consciousness must to some degree be refashioned with every generation, and New Right forces and their allies may yet convince large numbers of younger people who are many years from retirement that inevitable demographic, economic and fiscal pressures mean that we must “end Social

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<sup>12</sup> Just 7 percent of private-sector workers in America are labor union members, compared to 36 percent of government employees (Rothschild 2011). These recent attempts to break state workers' unions may be seen as the latest political campaign to spread neoliberal market logics from the private to the public sector.

Security as we know it” through neoliberal reforms.<sup>13</sup> My evidence in this study suggests that the success of such efforts will turn crucially on the role of news media.

#### **IV. Political Communication Research and Media-Elite “Manipulation”**

Key blind-spots in our knowledge of public opinion’s role in the rightward shift are partially due to the failure of policy studies scholars and social-scientific communication researchers to build on each other’s insights. Scholars have produced rich accounts of policy changes that have facilitated the staggering upward reallocation of material resources and political power that neoliberalism has entailed. But, I argue, they have not paid adequate attention to mass opinion because they generally are less aware of theories and research techniques from political psychology and media studies that could illuminate its importance. On the other hand, communication scholars in recent decades have combined nuanced conceptual frameworks with sophisticated methodological instruments to generate knowledge about the power of news media to shape popular attitudes and otherwise drive political outcomes. However, these researchers tend to be more interested in producing statements about general communicative processes than in explaining substantive historical outcomes. Moreover, the tacit assumptions of pluralistic policy contestation that inform much social scientific work in political communication have made researchers hesitant to explore fully the normative dimensions of their findings.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, scholars of the right turn in recent years have made concerns about the health of democratic politics central to their work, but limited contact with cutting-edge communication research has kept them from seeing the news media-mass opinion nexus through this critically oriented prism.

<sup>13</sup> A recent survey shows that while opposition to “reforms” of Medicare and Social Security remains strong among Americans as a whole, a majority of respondents who are younger than 30 favor “changes” to these programs “to reduce the budget deficit.” (Pew Center 2011) Since most “changes” to Social Security that are currently on the mainstream institutional agenda entail benefit cuts, increases in the regressive payroll tax or partial privatization, these results may indicate a potential political opening for neoliberal-New Right efforts.

<sup>14</sup> As Reese (2001: 28) argues, research on news frames is unavoidably an enterprise of political critique and evaluation: “To study framing means we must address normative issues. Although social science research has not emphasized explicit value judgments in analysis of press coverage, framing can’t help but suggest them.”

My work addresses these shortcomings by applying what we know generally about media influence on public opinion to the specific historical conditions and political forces that have animated the right turn in U.S. public policy. Moreover, because I share policy scholars' profound concern with fostering democratic ideals and practices, I have done what few communication scholars have attempted in offering a holistic and empirically grounded account of the democratic character of public debate on key policy issues. As I noted in Chapters 1 and 2, social scientific communication scholars have generated important studies about matters like the prevalence of official news sources and the partisan slant of election coverage, but have tended to avoid venturing into research designed to deliberately and critically evaluate mass communications with reference to the political-economic interests at play during specific historical episodes.

While my study is merely an entry point into this kind of work, its findings suggests some promising conceptual and methodological paths that scholars might consider following in the future. First, any project seeking to systematically investigate the ideological perspectives and informational resources that news audiences might draw on when expressing policy opinions or otherwise exercising political voice requires laborious content analyses. Too often, researchers simply infer the shape of mass communications environments through partial coding of small samples of news coverage. But political psychologists have shown that many different dimensions of communication are relevant for shaping popular attitudes and behavior, including the prevalence of different kinds of news voices and policy frames, and the overall ideological tenor of media reports. Moreover, specifying the potential effects of news coverage on the democratic quality of specific contemporary policy episodes requires some method by which to assess the *meaning* of communication frames — both for those actors who produce widely disseminated political

and policy messages (who tend to be relatively more powerful), and those who receive such messages (who tend to be less powerful).

This suggests that communication scholars who want to use empirical techniques to critically analyze the democratic vitality of policy debates must look *beyond* media content narrowly conceived, and into the wider political-economic and cultural environment. Too often, such contexts are taken as given in media research, with the result that scholars sometimes unproblematically practice the norm of “presumed democracy” that Bennett (1993b) identifies in mainstream journalists themselves. In other words, understanding the roles that news coverage might play in undermining or supporting democratic values and practices through its impact on popular attitudes requires questioning matters like the capacity for the U.S. two-party system to present meaningful policy alternatives on domestic issues, the practical import of the objectivity and neutrality codes that drive mainstream news reporting, the assumption that only political-economic elites are qualified to set governing agendas once citizens withdraw from electoral participation into their “natural” priorities of private life, and the idea that a democratically functioning “free press” is compatible with nearly unchallenged ownership and control of news production by (increasingly large and economically interconnected) for-profit businesses.

My point here is *not* to pronounce final judgment on any of these particularly troublesome concerns, nor is to claim that the conceptual-epistemological path by which I chose to confront them is the only — or even the best — tack to pursue. It is merely to suggest that meaningful *empirical* investigations of the extent to which news coverage helps or hinders ordinary people as democratic agents to form opinions resembling those “they would hold if they were aware of the best available information and analysis” (Zaller 1992: 313) requires that we, so far as possible, brush aside preconceptions like these and — much

like journalists are taught — let the evidence tell the story. While all good concrete social science begins with some body of theory (and, often, a standing historical narrative) with which to frame its questions and select its methods, I suggest that determining what is left out of news coverage that arguably ought to be there for an effectively democratic debate ultimately is an *empirical* question that requires a healthy measure of inductive reasoning (or, in Sayer’s [2010 [1984]) words, “intensive” research).

Moreover, in any project that seeks to trod the ground that Page and Shapiro (1992) laid out in their discussions of “elite manipulation” or “education” of mass opinion, the evidence must comprise not only (carefully and systematically analyzed) media coverage itself, but artifacts of elite discourse, polling data and — perhaps most importantly — information on the content of public policies. This is where the careful descriptive and analytic work of policy experts and scholars is invaluable. While uncertainty, bounded information and conceptual blind-spots afflict these experts just like anyone else — and while policies often have unexpected consequences — we have little hope of evaluating the democratic quality of mass-mediated debates if we do not rely on observers (inside and outside government) who can offer credible, evidence-based accounts of how policies like the Reagan economic plan or PRWORA were likely to affect constituencies like lower-income workers or poor single mothers. While I am skeptical — at best — that true objectivity is possible, I do think we have strong evidentiary support for certain kinds of propositions — for instance, that the 1981 tax legislation would bestow the bulk of its proximate financial benefits on upper-middle-income and wealthy people, or that welfare reform would allow states to deny social benefits after two years whether or not recipients obtained work (paying a living wage or otherwise) in private markets.



Ultimately, what we need in studies of elite-media “manipulation” are focused comparisons of: 1) what key provisions of proposed policies were likely to do (based on information available at the time), 2) what governing elites and organized political actors with clear stakes in affecting news coverage and mass opinion were saying *publicly* about such policies, 3) how news outlets with a broad reach into the population were covering the policies, and 4) how ordinary people were answering survey questions that probe their preferences regarding these policies. Overall, my project contributes to our knowledge of political communication not so much because its quantitative findings on the shape of media coverage diverge substantially from previous studies along particular content indicators (in fact, my results here largely confirm those of comparable analyses). Rather, its value lies in illuminating mass media’s role in an important historical moment by combining conceptual and methodological strategies that are often positioned in opposition to each other to produce a holistic depiction of key policy debates. In widening the epistemological purview of empirical political communication, my study is able to critically evaluate the democratic operation of news media in these instances — and perhaps more broadly.

#### **V. A Digression on the New Media (Or, Hasn’t the Internet Changed Everything?)**

Clearly, the configuration of American news media that policymakers, journalists, citizens and scholars confronted in 1981 — and even in 1996 — was very different than the one they see in 2011. There is no doubt that many things changed with the advent of cable television news and — especially — the Internet as a public phenomenon. These changes require certain conceptual and methodological reformulations of the research agenda I chart with this study and propose as a path toward clarifying the connections between media, public policy, power relations and democratic politics. But contrary to pronouncements from some pundits and scholars, cable and online news and information sources have not

made models of asymmetric power in political communication obsolete. I want to take a moment to explain why such technological euphoria is unwarranted and how my analytic approach may be applied to the new media era.

Cable news and the Internet have changed a great many factors within the communicative dimensions of politics. First, the technology now exists to allow much wider access to diverse sources of information and ideological perspectives, and much easier entry for small-scale message producers who can obtain the technical know-how to set up a website. And needless to say, political communication has dramatically accelerated in the new media age: regardless of their source, information and interpretations regarding foreign and domestic events and issues can be transmitted nearly instantaneously, and the proverbial “news cycle” has been compressed into oblivion. In some domains, even traditional conceptual distinctions between message “sender” and “receiver” are breaking down in new interactive modes of communication. And audience fragmentation spurred by the advent of new media is increasingly prompting people to self-select outlets that fit their views and interests. This means that it is, indeed, more difficult than in the past for political actors — even presidents — to immediately command large, broad audiences when they wish to disseminate policy messages.

None of these are small matters, and they are spurring a necessary re-examination of academic media theories and methods, not to mention of political actors’ strategies and tactics. However, I want to suggest that the brave new age that appears before us is not, in fact, changing certain fundamental dimensions of political communication in contemporary capitalist-democracies, or it is not changing them in the ways that many popular and some academic accounts suggest. At least when it comes to news with relevance for national-level public policy debates (broadly understood), it is not clear that new technology has prompted

much wider *effective* access to diverse sources of political information and discourse. This is especially the case for information and discourse — including, in the context of the right turn under neoliberalism, potentially counter-hegemonic interpretations — that does not flow proximately from elite political-economic sources.

First, while online access in some form is growing steadily, a recent U.S. Commerce Department survey indicates that nearly a third of Americans still do not use the Internet at home. And an additional 5 percent to 10 percent of those who do have home access do not have high-speed connections that allow effective engagement with audio, video or even basic web-page content. Moreover, access remains highly stratified by socioeconomic status: poorer areas have consistently lower rates of Internet access in any form and lower rates of high-speed connections than do wealthier areas. Fifteen years after President Clinton first used the term in a speech, there remains a significant “digital divide” in America (Kang 2011).<sup>15</sup>

Moreover, most people who go online regularly do not access political content in any form. A little more than a third of respondents to a 2010 survey by the Pew Center for the People and the Press reported having accessed news online the day before. In contrast, nearly 60 percent claimed to have watched TV news in some form the previous day; this number is virtually unchanged from 1996. Perhaps most importantly, news corporations — and, by extrapolation, the governments that dominate their source pools — still wield considerable power: what I would label “mainstream media” companies (i.e. major for-profit businesses that supply content relevant to politics and public policy issues) own all the news websites that people most frequently access, including Yahoo News, CNN, Google News,

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<sup>15</sup> Moreover, public interest and consumer groups charge that the recent survey overstates levels of high-speed access in poorer communities because government researchers did not independently test technical statistics supplied by online providers and did not account for pricing variations across communities, which can greatly impact the ability of lower-income residents to afford service (Kang 2011).

MSN and Fox; in contrast, just two percent of respondents to the Pew survey claim BBC online as a regular news destination, and just one percent list the Huffington Post (Pew Center 2010). Finally, Lawrence, Sides, and Farrell (2010) report that just 14 percent of respondents to the 2006 Cooperative Congressional Election Study claimed they read a blog that the authors could independently characterize as political. While stylistic enhancements and supplementary information is available at major media online sites that is not available in these outlets' traditional televisual and print forms, their basic contents — including, most crucially, the range of policy voices and ideological interpretations they offer — is much the same. These patterns should not surprise us: the largest, wealthiest and most powerful institutions in the “offline” world command the resources necessary to create an attractive and aggressively marketed presence in the online world.

Moreover, intriguing research suggests that the new media environment is actually amplifying the already considerable disparities in political knowledge and engagement that characterize the American public in the neoliberal era. One effect of cable TV (and, probably, online media) has been to help the already politically aware and active — who are disproportionately white, highly educated and affluent — to become much more so, while those who are less aware and active largely turn off from news altogether, gravitating toward newly plentiful entertainment media and other pursuits (Prior 2007). Moreover, Pew's 2010 survey shows that nearly 60 percent of respondents can be categorized as so-called “news grazers,” meaning they claim to receive news “from time to time” rather than “at regular times.” This number is actually up nine percentage points from 2006 (Pew Center 2010). As I noted in Chapter 8, political knowledge and engagement are both antecedents and outcomes of news reception, so this sort of class-inflected polarization — where the relatively powerful become more powerful and the relatively powerless become less so —

may be a stubborn force that stunts popular democratic capacities: with many lower-status people only occasionally exposed to news media — and with the media they are usually exposed to comprised of mainstream corporate outlets (in their online or conventional forms), the opportunities for them to receive key pieces of policy information and diverse framings of political and social issues are arguably as scarce as ever. And because people with lower levels of income, wealth and formal education tend to be less politically knowledgeable aside from their media habits, my experimental results suggest that they may be even more susceptible to the effects of hegemonic news discourse in the new media environment.

Finally, while audience fragmentation means that it is less likely that a President Reagan can schedule a prime-time speech to the nation on budget issues or a President Clinton can set a prime-time news conference on welfare and expect to reach a mass audience via the three major broadcast networks, this does not necessarily mean that powerful political-economic actors and the social forces they represent have less capacity to shape public policy opinion and other signals of popular consent. As I note above, the broad architecture of the U.S. mass communications system remains firmly in corporate hands, and the voices on cable channels and narrowly ideological websites — particularly those controlled by powerful business and political interests — can also wield anti-democratic communicative power: in fact, some discourse propagated in these venues might at times be even more dangerous because such voices are not bound by professional standards of objectivity, neutrality — and even factual rigor — that, however harmful to democracy they may be in other ways, can at least constrain the damage wrought by wild accusations, truly one-sided policy debates and overtly ideological commentary proffered in the guise of “news.” (Fox and Gangl 2011) In effect, people might be subject to ideational power precisely *through* self-selection, whereby their preferences and perceptions are continually

reinforced in a largely closed circle of frames and interpretations that support dominant power relations: in such a case, negative ideological operations would occur in a dynamic whereby people's consent is secured through a narrowed spectrum of discourse that they engage with by choice (where such "choice" is conditioned by prior engagements with dominant discourse).

To be sure, activist groups attempting to articulate potentially counter-hegemonic alternatives have successfully used new media technology to achieve notable political successes, particularly in embryonic democratic struggles abroad, and there is considerable potential for further victories along these lines (Bennett 2003). But the forces I describe suggest that major obstacles remain in the way of deploying these communicative tools in a manner that would prompt the kind of broad-based galvanization of popular forces that could present the sustained challenges necessary to arrest the neoliberal-New Right tide in the United States.

Clearly, political communication researchers in general (including critically oriented scholars interested in questions of popular democratic practice) need to refine their conceptual understandings — and especially, given the often-fleeting nature of online content and the issue of self-selection, their methods — to deal adequately with the new media environment. But making such adjustments in the face of changing historical conditions and social phenomena has long been routine practice in credible social science. Predictions are especially dangerous in a domain like this, where technology often changes too rapidly for journal and book publishing to keep up. However, I would suggest that a basic model of media hegemony — wherein unequal political-economic power relations are dialectically reflected in and indicative of unequal communicative influence (but where neither of these phenomena are unchangeable or unchallenged) — remains broadly

applicable in understanding the constraints on, and future possibilities for, American democracy even in the new media age.

This situation is not surprising: neo-Gramscian analytic approaches caution against seeing “technical fixes” or “technological solutions” for what are fundamentally social-political-economic dilemmas. Particular technologies can be harnessed as political tools toward various ends under favorable conditions, but technology writ-large is always-already political in one sense or another: people whose social circumstances, discursive-communicative histories and material opportunities militate against political awareness and activism will not magically be transformed into deliberate social agents because a new communications technology has been invented. And the political-economic forces that enframed the “old media” will not be overturned *merely* because of technological change.

In different ways, my reflections on the implications of this study point toward the need to conceptualize news media as not only crucially related to politics and economics, but as constitutive of larger social complexes that take in not only news outlets themselves but formal state apparatuses as well as economic structures and other institutions that in mainstream academic renderings are not usually understood as “political.” It is through this sort of holistic and thoroughly politicizing view that we can begin to critically specify the role of mass communications patterns at particular historical moments marked by key policy changes. And it is through this framework that we can begin to understand some promising paths toward widening the perimeters of democratic discourse in contemporary U.S. politics.

## **VI. Praxis and Policy: Specifying — and Challenging — the Determinants of Media Hegemony**

My examination of mainstream media coverage and popular consent during the neoliberal turn offers theoretically coherent and empirically grounded — if only tentative —

answers to some important questions about recent U.S. economic and social welfare policy debates, and about the relationships between democracy, power relations and political communication generally. But like any study, it raises many more questions than it answers. One crucial question that my empirical analyses cannot clearly answer springs immediately to mind: why did mass media coverage of the 1981 economic plan and the 1995-1996 welfare debate play out as it did?

In a constitutional order featuring vigorous formal press freedoms and with a media apparatus that constructs itself as offering the information and arguments that democratic citizens need to govern themselves effectively, why did neoliberal-New Right voices and frames dominate news discourse? During periods when pollsters were asking people to evaluate the wisdom and justice of major policy proposals, why did mainstream media audiences have so few opportunities to learn how much money the Reagan tax plan would provide families at different income levels, or how much the federal government spent on cash welfare? Why were non-official sources afforded so little airtime and so few column inches to disseminate their interpretations of these issues? What roles did journalists and news organizations play in this story? What about New Right-New Democrat governing elites and other key political actors? I advance some speculative responses to these critical questions in my case analyses in Chapters 4 through 7, but my empirical evidence in this study cannot provide solid answers.

Engaging these matters in a theoretically nuanced and empirically rigorous manner requires us to conceptualize media outlets in such a way as to avoid two key pitfalls: 1) seeing news organizations as fully independent actors that rely solely on their own peculiar economic, professional (or political) imperatives in choosing how to report on public policy and in selecting which political voices and ideological frames to disseminate, and 2) seeing



media coverage as thoroughly and mechanically — if usually informally — orchestrated by other actors and interests, such as governing elites or political party operatives. If we begin to think in this way, it becomes clear that the causal force for the patterns of media coverage that I document cannot be localized either in news organizations or in state apparatuses and other explicitly political sites. Both media outlets like ABC News and overtly political actors like President Reagan, the Heritage Foundation and President Clinton played roles in constructing the hegemonic depictions of economic and social welfare policy that helped shape mass opinion to support neoliberal-New Right goals. Specifying precisely how these forces interacted in particular policy episodes is a task for empirical analysis, but we can begin with some useful conceptual guides.

As I suggest in Section III, we must recognize that news media — whether publicly or privately owned — is a thoroughly political institution that not only affects public policies and governing actors, but is affected by these policies and actors. While the nature of these effects and their modes of operation have varied considerably in different historical contexts, the thoroughly political character of news media has been a constant in American history — and, probably, in that of all modern societies. Working from seminal studies on the practices and routines that guide contemporary news-gathering and reporting, political scientists and communication researchers have begun to explore media as a political institution, charting the complex and historically shifting interrelationships between journalists and news outlets, on the one hand, and political elites and the formal apparatus of government, on the other (Cook 1998b; Sparrow 1999). These analyses provide a promising entry point for designing focused empirical studies to examine just how various forces interact to produce the informational content and ideological tenor of news coverage in particular contexts.

Media organizations and overtly political actors must abstract from complex realities in order to construct descriptions and explanations of public policy that have the capacity to affect mass opinion. In this sense, there is always something “left out” of a particular news story or a series of reports, and as scholars have argued, professional codes play important roles in determining these exclusions. But we should take care not to depoliticize and reify these journalistic routines: not only are they politically consequential in that they help shape the content of news in ways that favor certain overtly political forces and suppress others, but they are political in that these codes themselves stem in part from political-economic factors. In this connection, one severely neglected area of research concerns the impact of government policy itself on how news outlets operate as political institutions: the U.S. national government has always regulated media in one form or another — through subsidies and tax provisions as well as through formal rules that directly affect content or shape the operation of media markets (Cook 1998b; McChesney 2004). Moreover, even under an imaginary scenario in which the state does not impinge on media in these relatively explicit ways, it must do so implicitly because the existence of “free” markets themselves entails forms of “regulation” shot through with power relations, however much the discourse of neoliberal-New Right actors might suggest otherwise. All the forces that shape news coverage are political — whether we might observe them as localized in government public relations offices, TV newsrooms or corporate boardrooms. This means that the processes determining what is included and what is excluded from public discourse as it appears in mass media are never ideologically innocent, even in the normal case when particular reporters or executives are not deliberately attempting to slant the news to favor particular political perspectives.

This conceptualization might lead us to see media-government interconnections as constituting a specific dimension of the larger complexes of state-society relations that prevail in particular historical periods. For instance, neoliberalism has entailed a particular set of material conditions and economic arrangements, as well as a particular configuration of political forces localized in formal governing apparatuses (e.g., Congress, the Presidency, the Supreme Court, executive-branch agencies etc.) and allied institutions (such as major party organizations). These forces engage in real and consequential contestation over economic and social welfare issues, but usually as circumscribed within definable parameters set by the New Right. Thus, the era has generated a particular economic and social welfare policy regime (tending toward upper-income tax cuts, privatization and devolution, reduction of social supports and re-regulation in favor of business interests). Further, as I have shown in this study, neoliberalism has entailed a particular set of legitimating ideas and discourses — and a dominant (though not uniform or uncontested) flow of these ideas and discourses through the media of mass communication. Neoliberalism has also brought a particular set of policies that are specific to media: as in other areas, these policies generally have entailed a re-regulation of the news industry in the interests of market imperatives and business power. Most prominently, the Fairness Doctrine — which set standards (albeit weak ones) for political and ideological diversity on broadcast outlets — was repealed in 1987 (Aufderheide 1990), while constraints on media industry consolidation have been continually relaxed, most notably through the Clinton administration-backed Telecommunications Act of 1996. There is suggestive evidence that these moves have increased the power of corporate interests to shape the news (Bagdikian 2004; McChesney 2004).

On a theoretical level, none of the constituent parts of the state-society/media-government complex should be considered strictly determinative of the others: for example,

news coverage is shaped by the political debate among governing elites but — through its effects on public opinion, elections and other mechanisms — itself shapes that debate. News coverage shapes public policy — also through its impact on mass opinion and more directly on elite behavior — but is, in turn, shaped by policy (such as Federal Communications Commission rules and provisions of the USA Patriot Act that allow law enforcement access to journalists' phone records). Moreover, economic forces shape all these parts and are in turn shaped by them (e.g., political elites — through government policies — shape economic growth and levels of inequality, economic conditions shape news operations, while media coverage affects consumer sentiment as well as broader economic conditions through its effects on political debates that shape economic policy). While we can specify general patterns and dominant configurations in particular historical contexts, there is some contradiction and contestation at all levels: we are dealing with an open system in which social agents shape structures even as structures constrain agents (e.g. Hall 1985; Sayer 2010 [1984]). And complicated as they are, all these nominally domestic dynamics are embedded within an even more multifaceted and shifting global configuration of political-economic-cultural-ideological forces.

My point in these speculations is not to wade into ontological-epistemological debates or to defend a particular theoretical conception, but merely to sketch how scholars who are interested in the connections between news coverage, mass opinion, public policy and democratic contestation might think in a manner that is less prone to reductionism. Social scientific practice — like social knowledge generally — requires abstracting out particular features of a complex reality and focusing sustained and systematic attention on them. But only if we have a nuanced working conceptualization of political processes broadly defined — as well as a working knowledge of history — can social scientists know

which features to abstract and which methods to deploy in their efforts to understand those features. Conducting this kind of research is no small task, but its paramount importance to concrete social relations means that avoiding it would represent an abdication of responsibility by those who have resources and tools to help make democratic life better. As Lukes (2005 [1974]: 57) notes ironically in responding to narrowly behaviorist and positivist critics who condemn as futile and unscientific efforts to understand subtle operations of power, “such pessimism amounts to saying: ‘Why let things be difficult when, with just a little more effort, we can make them seem impossible?’”

One promising avenue for answering the question I posed at the beginning of this section — why mass media covered the 1981 and 1995-1996 policy debates as it did — is to explore the potential impact of governing elites’ strategic communications practices, perhaps examining primary source documents (such as public relations plans, memoirs and letters, and — if it can be obtained — internal polling and focus group data) and making focused comparisons to particularly (empirically observed) patterns of news coverage and public opinion during these cases.<sup>16</sup> Another tack would be to look more broadly at the media policy regime prevailing during the period at issue and proceed to conduct an additional case study of news coverage and political discourse during a roughly comparable public policy debate under an *earlier* media policy regime: for instance, one could study the debate over the guaranteed-income proposal (known as the Family Assistance Plan) during the Nixon administration and try to determine what affects the Fairness Doctrine might have had in shaping patterns of news coverage that differed from those that characterized the 1995-1996 welfare reform debate (which occurred after the Fairness Doctrine had been repealed). One virtue of this approach is that it lends itself to future iterations in which one could

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<sup>16</sup> See Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) for an example of this approach.

investigate potential “policy feedback” dynamics (see, e.g., Mettler and Soss 2004) in the specific domain of media policy: perhaps in cases such as these we might detect a pattern whereby policy shifts (such as the repeal of the Fairness Doctrine) affected patterns of mass politics (e.g., public opinion) *through the mechanism of* news coverage. This approach could not directly answer why media coverage was shaded as it was during the 1995-1996 debate, but it could point to potentially important causal forces by showing that (roughly) similar news outlets covered a (roughly) similar issue debate differently under a (very) different media policy regime.

This way of seeing the dynamics of political power generally — and the formation of public opinion specifically — from a broad perspective should remind us that news coverage is far from being the only important organ through which hegemonic (and potentially counter-hegemonic) perceptions are formulated and reformulated: the workplace, the education system, voluntary groups, labor unions, religious organizations, commercial advertising, entertainment media and families all play roles in shaping how people see politics — and even how they see specific policies. Certainly, the political linkages and implications at some of these sites are more explicit and transparent than at others, but none are politically neutral, none are ideologically innocent and none are untouched by public policy.

Despite their representation in public discourse of politics and the state, on the one hand, as existentially separate from economics and civil society, on the other, neoliberal-New Right actors seem to have understood something about the intimate material and cultural connections between these social spheres from the start (Lapham 2004; O’Connor 2008): not only have conservative forces worked strategically over many decades to propagate their favored political-economic understandings and policy prescriptions through all these

ostensibly “non-political” institutions (including both specialized and mainstream media). But they seem to have grasped that the very meaning of these cultural-communicative sites is a field of political contestation: in the case of news coverage specifically, this has entailed a relentless depiction of major media as part of the left-liberal establishment they are attempting to undermine on behalf “the people.”

Efforts by conservatives to tar the mainstream American news media began early. While I would not classify the Nixon administration as entirely within the fold of the neoliberal-New Right — for one, these political-economic forces had not yet fully congealed by the early 1970s — many conservative trends that later took more definite shape had considerable influence on the administration. The explicit definition of mass communication as a grounds for political struggle is one of them: Nixon and his allies mounted sustained campaigns to influence public support that were refined by later administrations, including orchestrating favorable public responses to White House speeches (Schell 1976) and conducting extensive internal polling operations in order to frame their public communications in superficially attractive ways (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995). News outlets themselves — especially in the context of Vietnam war coverage — were special targets, with speechwriter Patrick Buchanan and Vice President Spiro Agnew taking the lead to skewer liberal bias (Schell 1976: 67-71).

Fast-forwarding to the 1990s, conservative columnist Jeff Jacoby described the Gingrich Congress as facing “a largely hostile press corps.” In the same set of musings on the Contract With America, Alonzo L. Hamby lamented Republicans’ failure to get their message across: “Admittedly,” he said, “it is no easy task to get a conservative perspective past the filter of a predominantly liberal-leaning national media, but it can be done.” (Pitney et al. 1995) Gingrich himself accused *The New York Times* of tarnishing his everyman

credentials by inaccurately reporting that he had traded in his car for a Cadillac after ascending to the speakership. The Washington press corps, he fumed, is characterized by “bias and slanting” and a “constant, unending barrage of distortion.”<sup>17</sup>

Less than two months before Clinton signed PRWORA after nearly two years (at least) of right-leaning mainstream news coverage enforcing the neoliberal-paternalist consensus on welfare reform, Heritage Foundation president Edwin Feulner asserted in an op-ed that the evidence for liberal bias in the major media is “now overwhelming” as he urged citizens to listen to the burgeoning talk radio circuit for a dose of “balance.” For decades, Feulner claimed, left-liberal elites had kept a “steam valve” on the popular conservatism that dominated most of America — in part by imposing “artificial” federal regulatory controls on the media industry: once “free” consumer preferences were allowed to express themselves, the communications landscape began to reflect authentic American mass conservatism. Feulner neglected to mention the Clinton administration’s strong support for the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which the president had signed less than five months earlier. And he asserted — without evidence — that “few bother to deny” the existence of liberal bias,” which he illustrated colorfully with images of effete journalists “chatting with Kennedy clones at liberal cocktail parties.”<sup>18</sup>

Thus, neoliberal-New Right forces have grasped the importance not only of shaping the contours of media coverage to favor right-leaning policy perspectives, but of defining what “The Media” means in popular American political culture. These representations may have played a part in pushing news coverage further to the right by generating “flack” that created subtle pressures on journalists and producers not to show “liberal bias.” (see, e.g.,

<sup>17</sup> “What Elections Mean to Conservatives.” (November 15, 1994) Available through the Heritage Foundation online archives.

<sup>18</sup> “Tune in to Talk Radio.” (June 27, 1996) Available through the Heritage Foundation online archives.



Herman and Chomsky 1988) Even as mainstream media offered largely uncritical coverage of the New Right-led drive for neoliberal tax and welfare policy — and even as the New Democrats who controlled the White House for most of the 1990s largely accepted the business-friendly, class-biased, gendered and racially coded premises that undergirded the neoliberal turn — conservative forces continued to hammer away at the demon of liberal media slant.

To be sure, like most instantiations of dominant ideological operations, these attacks on the “liberal media” are not pure deceptions and mystifications. Even today, more national political journalists define themselves as “liberal” than “conservative” and more identify as Democrats than Republicans. Surveys also indicate that their policy views are considerably to the left of the “typical American” on socio-cultural issues such as women’s rights, freedom of expression and the rights of sexual minorities. Moreover, a case can be made that from the end of World War II into the 1970s key institutions of civil society — including much (though not all) of major national news media — operated to support —and were supported by — the centrist-liberal hegemony that governed the U.S. political economy. As I suggest above, we should view media as part of broader, historically variable complexes of political-economic forces and arrangements. But these forces and arrangements do not unfold according to naturalistic evolutionary processes and they do not emerge spontaneously: they are the product of political and social struggle that entails considerable ideological work. Campaigns by the nascent neoliberal-New Right to attack mainstream media were among the forces that led to the broad conservative ascendance. And these actors’ efforts to construct themselves as insurgents against a liberal cultural-communications establishment — even as they have increasingly dominated governing institutions, policy agendas and

discursive parameters — have only intensified since Nixon. As such, these efforts are key to the uneasy but stubborn hold of the neoliberal-New Right hegemony.

All this suggests that left forces seeking to challenge that hegemony would do well to focus attention on the major opinion-shaping sites of American society — including news outlets — and that they especially should mount efforts to combat the mythology of the “liberal media.” Moreover, both progressive social movements seeking to challenge particular substantive aspects of the neoliberal-New Right agenda and critics whose concerns center more generally on the democratic character of contemporary mass communications neglect the policy regimes that govern news coverage at their peril. As I suggest above, the broader market fundamentalism that neoliberalism has entailed has brought with it a corresponding drive — along with a corresponding legitimating rhetoric of “freedom” and “choice” — to eliminate the vestiges of popular-democratic control over news media. Most recently we see this in continuing efforts by conservatives to defund public broadcasting and to stave off “net-neutrality” rules that would stop corporations from imposing financially tiered technical performance structures on Internet communications that would harm the ability of local or specialized news outlets, community groups and social movement organizations to disseminate information and ideas.

Creating structural and institutional conditions that would encourage something like a critical public sphere (Habermas 1989 [1962]) must involve thorough reconsideration of dominant models of democratic communication. The idea that freedom of debate is maximized by negative liberties that create a “marketplace of ideas” had practical purchase only in an age in which media corporations had some legally enforced and structurally incentivized obligations to serve the “public interest” in political information and diverse viewpoints (McChesney 2004). But these normative ideals seem increasingly hollow in a time

when markets are worshiped and public goods degraded to legitimate corporate power. Ongoing popular-democratic mobilization for media reform is crucial for pressuring the state along at least two related dimensions: 1) carving more practical space for grassroots communications, such as through incentives for community and nonprofit journalism and broadcasting — especially for institutions controlled by historically marginalized and oppressed constituencies — as well as strong open-access rules for the Internet and subsidized broadband connections for poorer areas, and 2) changing the structural equation for media corporations, such as through limits on mergers and consolidation, controls on commercial advertising, a revised Fairness Doctrine, and mandated free airtime for political candidates who demonstrate minimal initial public support.

Many scholars who have made compelling cases against the degraded state of democratic communication have advocated reforms of media coverage that center mostly on urging news outlets to operate more responsibly (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Gilens 1999). While I do not underestimate the potential democratizing effects of such efforts as the “civic journalism” movement, my empirical evidence of the deeply rooted power distortions that characterize contemporary news coverage indicates that popular-democratic reform and transformation of mass communications processes requires popular-democratic reform and transformation of the political-economic determinants of media coverage. Scholars’ hesitancy to extend the logic of their media critiques to the larger forces that shape news coverage suggests a resignation to contemporary patterns of power relations and a too-easy equation of market dynamics with free choice,<sup>19</sup> as well as a broad uneasiness with suggesting changes that might smack of left ideological bias.

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<sup>19</sup> See McLeod et al. (2002: 254), who caution against using self-fulfilling negative stereotypes of “audience potential” to reify degraded patterns of political communication as unproblematic products of “popular demand.” See Smythe (2006 [1981]) and Meehan (2006) for political-economic critiques of the media ratings-advertising complex and its gendered and class-inflected construction of this “demand.”

This suggests that the submerged connections between political communication and the conservative shift in U.S. public policy have come full-circle: as I demonstrated in Section III, empirical research on the right turn has paid far too little attention to media's potential role in shaping a climate of mass opinion that has democratically legitimated neoliberal-New Right projects. As I argue in this section and the previous one, our conceptual models of contemporary media-government relations in the context of democracy have been too cramped in failing to consider broader political-economic determinants and complex and reciprocal causal mechanisms. And my brief reflections on potential practical avenues for redressing mass communications distortions suggest that the hegemonic coverage patterns on issues like taxation and social welfare that I demonstrate in this study may be inextricably bound up with a broader political-economic climate that has valorized neoliberal understandings and practices even in news production itself. All this points to the continuing need for critically oriented empirical research in political communication.

## **VII. Toward a More Scientific Media Critique and a More Critical Science of Mass Communication**

Conducting the studies that are necessary to help clarify mass media's role in the interrelated systems and processes that determine the exercise of political power requires scholars to challenge trends toward academic overspecialization. Too often, those in one field (such as U.S. public policy studies) are mostly unaware of research in another (such as political psychology or media studies) that bears directly on their central concerns. As critical theorists have long argued, the reification of separate social spheres — such as “the economy” vs. “the state” or “the media” vs. “the political system” — is mirrored in the

hyper-segmentation that afflicts the social sciences. I do not suggest that abolishing all specialization is either possible or desirable, nor do I mean to cast aspersions on countless examples of valuable scholarship that sit firmly within one or another disciplinary tradition. Clearly, a division of labor is necessary and abstraction from infinitely complex concrete particularities is unavoidable. My point, rather, is that an unhealthy attachment to the doctrinaire assumptions that undergird all academic fields and research paradigms to a greater or lesser extent is a significant obstacle to the advancement of knowledge — and to the improvement of human relations that scholars in the critical theory tradition deliberately seek.

Sophisticated exercises in large-scale quantitative content analysis, survey research and experiments are epistemologically and substantively impoverished absent their integration into a conceptual architecture that explores the material *and* cultural relationships between political communication and power arrangements: in order to understand how language and ideas influence action, the *meaning* of political discourse as manifested in media coverage must be explicated in the multidimensional ensemble of economic, social and cultural arrangements that constitutes particular historical contexts. This includes reference to the understandings of mass audiences (“decoders”) and elite-level producers (“encoders”), as well as to the larger structural forces that both constrict and enable the generation of meaning at both levels.

However, provocative critical theorizations about the implications of mass media lose their force without a strong foundation grounded in the concrete shape of news coverage and public opinion — including its material dimensions. As Sayer (2010 [1984]: 239) writes, “abstract research cannot displace concrete research and its dependence on empirical investigation.” Finally, understanding how discourses inform and relate to *action*

requires approaches that seek (however fallibly) to describe and explain patterns of social behavior: regardless of the extent to which one believes that opinion surveys present a valid account of human attitudes, a truly critical scholarship cannot fail to take their determinants seriously, because poll results inform action: political actors consider opinion polls to be real, and thus, on a different level, scholars must as well.

In American political science, the boundaries between empirical and normative work are drawn arbitrarily and artificially. Standards of argumentative cogency, evidentiary support and methodological rigor are indispensable for any credible scientific enterprise, but scholars too often shrink from fully confronting important questions empirically because of a vague fear that they will transgress the fact-value divide — or, worse, that they will be criticized for letting an ideological bias guide their choice of research focus. These are especially unfortunate circumstances for the field of political communication: clarifying the role of mass media in democratic politics calls for a multi-method, multi-disciplinary approach that focuses not just on the “what” of news content and public opinion, but also the “how” and “why.” And empirically probing these latter questions may lead to upsetting conclusions about the easy compatibility of U.S. political-economic arrangements with democracy (Lindblom 1977, 2001).

This research agenda requires both rigorously applying the best social scientific methodologies — such as detailed, full-text content analyses and laboratory experiments — and situating findings in a theoretical and historical context that engages head-on normatively charged questions about relations of power in contemporary society that are too often ignored or marginalized in mainstream political science. Again, Lukes’ (2005 [1974]: 57) assessment applies with special force to the links between elite discourse, media coverage

and mass opinion: “My conclusion, in short, is that a deeper analysis of power relations is possible — an analysis that is at once value-laden, theoretical and empirical.”

## Appendix -- Supplementary Materials

### Content Analytic Scheme (Chapter 4)

#### *Story Focus Codes:*

**Class Implications** (impact on/implications for various income or socioeconomic class groupings)

**Macroeconomics** (effects on/implications for broader economy)

**Procedure/Strategy/Tactics** (internal governmental procedure; political jockeying, strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)

**Fiscal Implications** (effects on/implications for federal deficit/debt/revenues)

#### *Source ID Codes:*

**Administration**

**Republican Party**

**Democratic Party**

**Conservative Interest Group/SMO**

**Progressive Interest Group/SMO**

**Research Organization/Academia**

**State/Local Government (nonpartisan)**

**Federal Bureaucracy**

**Ordinary Citizen**

#### *Frame Codes:*

(Note: messages that favor neoliberal-New Right perspectives are in bold; those that counter this ideological current are underlined; the remaining are neutral, unclear or ambivalent):

**Direct Financial Benefit** (tax plan provides direct monetary benefits to low-/middle-income people)

**Economic Stimulus (pro)** (tax/budget plan will boost broader economy)

Economic Stimulus (con) (tax/budget plan will not boost broader economy)

Affluent Direct Tilt (tax plan unjustly favors wealthy/affluent, is unfair to low-/middle-income people)

Government Programs (pro) (domestic social/regulatory programs presented in a favorable light; need to preserve or increase funding for them)

**Government Programs (con)** (domestic social/regulatory programs presented in an unfavorable light; need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them)

Fiscal Implications (tax/budget plan will either improve or damage government fiscal health)



Procedure/Strategy/Internal Political Process (internal governmental procedure; political jockeying, strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)

**Pro-Tax Cut (general)** (tax cuts — or Reagan plan in particular — are generally good)

**Pro-Affluent Tilt** (tax plan's tilt toward upper-income people is beneficial or fair)

Anti-Tax Cut (general) (tax cuts — or Reagan plan in particular — are generally bad)

**Financial Autonomy** (government unfairly confiscates money from private individuals or businesses)

***Information Designation Codes:***

**Citizen Benefits** (any information breaking down tax plan benefits by income group)

**Business Benefits** (any specific mention of tax breaks/benefits/incentives for businesses)

**Payroll Taxes** (any information on how payroll [Social Security/Medicare] taxes relate to the debate)

**Budget Cuts** (any information on specific proposed spending cuts)

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**Textual Artifacts (Chapter 5):**

**Presidential Address Before a Joint Session of the Congress on the Program for Economic Recovery**

February 18, 1981

Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, distinguished Members of Congress, honored guests, and fellow citizens:

Only a month ago I was your guest in this historic building, and I pledged to you my cooperation in doing what is right for this Nation that we all love so much. I'm here tonight to reaffirm that pledge and to ask that we share in restoring the promise that is offered to every citizen by this, the last, best hope of man on Earth.

All of us are aware of the punishing inflation which has for the first time in 60 years held to double-digit figures for 2 years in a row. Interest rates have reached absurd levels of more than 20 percent and over 15 percent for those who would borrow to buy a home. All across this land one can see newly built homes standing vacant, unsold because of mortgage interest rates.

Almost 8 million Americans are out of work. These are people who want to be productive. But as the months go by, despair dominates their lives. The threats of layoff and unemployment hang over other millions, and all who work are frustrated by their inability to keep up with inflation.

One worker in a Midwest city put it to me this way: He said, "I'm bringing home more dollars than I ever believed I could possibly earn, but I seem to be getting worse off." And he is. Not only have hourly earnings of the American worker, after adjusting for inflation, declined 5 percent over the past 5 years, but in these 5 years, Federal personal taxes for the average family have increased 67 percent. We can no longer procrastinate and hope that things will get better. They will not. Unless we act forcefully -- and now -- the economy will get worse.

Can we, who man the ship of state, deny it is somewhat out of control? Our national debt is approaching \$1 trillion. A few weeks ago I called such a figure, a trillion dollars, incomprehensible, and I've been trying ever since to think of a way to illustrate how big a trillion really is. And the best I could come up with is that if you had a stack of thousand-dollar bills in your hand only 4 inches high, you'd be a millionaire. A trillion dollars would be a stack of thousand-dollar bills 67 miles high. The interest on the public debt this year we know will be over \$90 billion, and unless we change the proposed spending for the fiscal year beginning October 1st, we'll add another almost \$80 billion to the debt.

Adding to our troubles is a mass of regulations imposed on the shopkeeper, the farmer, the craftsman, professionals, and major industry that is estimated to add \$100 billion to the price of the things we buy, and it reduces our ability to produce. The rate of increase in American productivity, once one of the highest in the world, is among the lowest of all major industrial nations. Indeed, it has actually declined in the last 3 years.

Now, I've painted a pretty grim picture, but I think I've painted it accurately. It is within our power to change this picture, and we can act with hope. There's nothing wrong with our internal strengths. There has been no breakdown of the human, technological, and natural resources upon which the economy is built.

Based on this confidence in a system which has never failed us, but which we have failed through a lack of confidence and sometimes through a belief that we could fine-tune the economy and get it tuned to our liking, I am proposing a comprehensive four-point program. Now, let me outline in detail some of the principal parts of this program. You'll each be provided with a completely detailed copy of the entire program.

This plan is aimed at reducing the growth in government spending and taxing, reforming and eliminating regulations which are unnecessary and unproductive or counterproductive, and encouraging a consistent monetary policy aimed at maintaining the value of the currency. If enacted in full, this program can help America create 13 million new jobs, nearly 3 million more than we would have without these measures. It will also help us to gain control of inflation.

It's important to note that we're only reducing the rate of increase in taxing and spending. We're not attempting to cut either spending or taxing levels below that which we presently have. This plan will get our economy moving again, [create] productivity growth, and thus create the jobs that our people must have.

And I'm asking that you join me in reducing direct Federal spending by \$41.4 billion in fiscal year 1982, and this goes along with another \$7.7 billion in user fees and off-budget savings for a total of \$49.1 billion. And this will still allow an increase of \$40.8 billion over 1981 spending.

Now, I know that exaggerated and inaccurate stories about these cuts have disturbed many people, particularly those dependent on grant and benefit programs for their basic needs. Some of you have heard from constituents, I know, afraid that social security checks, for example, were going to be taken away from them. Well, I regret the fear that these unfounded stories have caused, and I welcome this opportunity to set things straight.

We will continue to fulfill the obligations that spring from our national conscience. Those who, through no fault of their own, must depend on the rest of us -- the poverty stricken, the disabled, the elderly, all those with true need -- can rest assured that the social safety net of programs they depend on are exempt from any cuts.

The full retirement benefits of the more than 31 million social security recipients will be continued, along with an annual cost-of-living increase. Medicare will not be cut, nor will supplemental income for the

blind, the aged, and the disabled. And funding will continue for veterans pensions. School breakfasts and lunches for the children of low-income families will continue, as will nutrition and other special services for the aging. There will be no cut in Project Head Start or summer youth jobs.

All in all, nearly \$216 billion worth of programs providing help for tens of millions of Americans will be fully funded. But government will not continue to subsidize individuals or particular business interests where real need cannot be demonstrated. And while we will reduce some subsidies to regional and local governments, we will at the same time convert a number of categorical grant programs into block grants to reduce wasteful administrative overhead and to give local governments and States more flexibility and control. We call for an end in duplication to Federal programs and reform of those which are not cost-effective.

Now, already some have protested that there must be no reduction in aid to schools. Well, let me point out that Federal aid to education amounts to only 8 percent of the total educational funding, and for this 8 percent, the Federal Government has insisted on tremendously disproportionate share of control over our schools. Whatever reductions we've proposed in that 8 percent will amount to very little in the total cost of education. They will, however, restore more authority to States and local school districts.

Historically, the American people have supported by voluntary contributions more artistic and cultural activities than all the other countries in the world put together. I wholeheartedly support this approach and believe that Americans will continue their generosity. Therefore, I'm proposing a savings of \$85 million in the Federal subsidies now going to the arts and humanities.

There are a number of subsidies to business and industry that I believe are unnecessary, not because the activities being subsidized aren't of value, but because the marketplace contains incentives enough to warrant continuing these activities without a government subsidy. One such subsidy is the Department of Energy's synthetic fuels program. We will continue support of research leading to development of new technologies and more independence from foreign oil, but we can save at least \$3.2 billion by leaving to private industry the building of plants to make liquid or gas fuels from coal.

We're asking that another major industry -- business subsidy I should say, the Export-Import Bank loan authority, be reduced by one-third in 1982. We're doing this because the primary beneficiaries of taxpayer funds in this case are the exporting companies themselves -- most of them profitable corporations.

This brings me to a number of other lending programs in which government makes low-interest loans, some of them at an interest rate as low as 2 percent. What has not been very well understood is that the Treasury Department has no money of its own to lend; it has to go into the private capital market and borrow the money. So, in this time of excessive interest rates, the government finds itself borrowing at an interest rate several times as high as the interest it gets back from those it lends the money to. And this difference, of course, is paid by your constituents -- the taxpayers. They get hit again if they try to borrow, because government borrowing contributes to raising all interest rates.

By terminating the Economic Development Administration, we can save hundreds of millions of dollars in 1982 and billions more over the next few years. There's a lack of consistent and convincing evidence that EDA and its Regional Commissions have been effective in creating new jobs. They have been effective in creating an array of planners, grantmen, and professional middlemen. We believe we can do better just by the expansion of the economy and the job creation which will come from our economic program.

The Food Stamp program will be restored to its original purpose, to assist those without resources to purchase sufficient nutritional food. We will, however, save \$1.8 billion in fiscal year 1982 by removing from eligibility those who are not in real need or who are abusing the program. But even with this reduction, the program will be budgeted for more than \$10 billion.

We will tighten welfare and give more attention to outside sources of income when determining the amount of welfare that an individual is allowed. This, plus strong and effective work requirements, will save \$520 million in the next year.

I stated a moment ago our intention to keep the school breakfast and lunch programs for those in true need. But by cutting back on meals for children of families who can afford to pay, the savings will be \$1.6 billion in the fiscal year 1982.

Now, let me just touch on a few other areas which are typical of the kind of reductions we've included in this economic package. The Trade Adjustment Assistance program provides benefits for workers who are unemployed when foreign imports reduce the market for various American products, causing shutdown of plants and layoff of workers. The purpose is to help these workers find jobs in growing sectors of our economy. There's nothing wrong with that, but because these benefits are paid out on top of normal unemployment benefits, we wind up paying greater benefits to those who lose their jobs because of foreign competition than we do to their friends and neighbors who are laid off due to domestic competition. Anyone must agree that this is unfair. Putting these two programs on the same footing will save \$1.15 billion in just 1 year.

Earlier I made mention of changing categorical grants to States and local governments into block grants. Now, we know of course that the categorical grant programs burden local and State governments with a mass of Federal regulations and Federal paperwork. Ineffective targeting, wasteful administrative overhead -- all can be eliminated by shifting the resources and decision-making authority to local and State government. This will also consolidate programs which are scattered throughout the Federal bureaucracy, bringing government closer to the people and saving \$23.9 billion over the next 5 years.

Our program for economic renewal deals with a number of programs which at present are not cost-effective. An example is Medicaid. Right now Washington provides the States with unlimited matching payments for their expenditures; at the same time, we here in Washington pretty much dictate how the States are going to manage those programs. We want to put a cap on how much the Federal Government will contribute, but at the same time allow the States much more flexibility in managing and structuring the programs. I know from our experience in California that such flexibility could have led to far more cost-effective reforms. Now, this will bring a savings of \$1 billion next year.

The space program has been and is important to America, and we plan to continue it. We believe, however, that a reordering of priorities to focus on the most important and cost-effective NASA programs can result in a savings of a quarter of a million dollars.

Now, coming down from space to the mailbox, the Postal Service has been consistently unable to live within its operating budget. It is still dependent on large Federal subsidies. We propose reducing those subsidies by \$632 million in 1982 to press the Postal Service into becoming more effective, and in subsequent years the savings will continue to add up.

The Economic Regulatory Administration in the Department of Energy has programs to force companies to convert to specific fuels. It has the authority to administer a gas rationing plan, and prior to decontrol it ran the oil price control program. With these and other regulations gone we can save several hundreds of millions of dollars over the next few years.

I'm sure there's one department you've been waiting for me to mention, the Department of Defense. It's the only department in our entire program that will actually be increased over the present budgeted figure. But even here there was no exemption. The Department of Defense came up with a number of cuts which reduce the budget increase needed to restore our military balance. These measures will save \$2.9 billion in 1982 outlays, and by 1986 a total of \$28.2 billion will have been saved -- or perhaps I should say,

will have been made available for the necessary things that we must do. The aim will be to provide the most effective defense for the lowest possible cost.

I believe that my duty as President requires that I recommend increases in defense spending over the coming years. I know that you're all aware -- but I think it bears saying again -- that since 1970 the Soviet Union has invested \$300 billion more in its military forces than we have. As a result of its massive military buildup, the Soviets have made a significant numerical advantage in strategic nuclear delivery systems, tactical aircraft, submarines, artillery, and anti-aircraft defense. To allow this imbalance to continue is a threat to our national security. Notwithstanding our economic straits, making the financial changes beginning now is far less costly than waiting and having to attempt a crash program several years from now.

We remain committed to the goal of arms limitation through negotiation. I hope we can persuade our adversaries to come to realistic balanced and verifiable agreements. But, as we negotiate, our security must be fully protected by a balanced and realistic defense program.

Now, let me say a word here about the general problem of waste and fraud in the Federal Government. One government estimate indicated that fraud alone may account for anywhere from 1 to 10 percent -- as much as \$25 billion of Federal expenditures for social programs. If the tax dollars that are wasted or mismanaged are added to this fraud total, the staggering dimensions of this problem begin to emerge.

The Office of Management and Budget is now putting together an interagency task force to attack waste and fraud. We're also planning to appoint as Inspectors General highly trained professionals who will spare no effort to do this job. No administration can promise to immediately stop a trend that has grown in recent years as quickly as government expenditures themselves, but let me say this: Waste and fraud in the Federal Government is exactly what I've called it before -- an unrelenting national scandal, a scandal we're bound and determined to do something about.

Marching in lockstep with the whole program of reductions in spending is the equally important program of reduced tax rates. Both are essential if we're to have economic recovery. It's time to create new jobs, to build and rebuild industry, and to give the American people room to do what they do best. And that can only be done with a tax program which provides incentive to increase productivity for both workers and industry.

Our proposal is for a 10-percent across-the-board cut every year for 3 years in the tax rates for all individual income taxpayers, making a total cut in the tax-cut rates of 30 percent. This 3-year reduction will also apply to the tax on unearned income, leading toward an eventual elimination of the present differential between the tax on earned and unearned income.

Now, I would have hoped that we could be retroactive with this. But as it stands, the effective starting date for these 10-percent personal income tax rate reductions will call for as of July 1st of this year.

Again, let me remind you that while this 30-percent reduction will leave the taxpayers with \$500 billion more in their pockets over the next 5 years, it's actually only a reduction in the tax increase already built into the system. Unlike some past "tax reforms," this is not merely a shift of wealth between different sets of taxpayers. This proposal for an equal reduction in everyone's tax rates will expand our national prosperity, enlarge national incomes, and increase opportunities for all Americans.

Some will argue, I know, that reducing tax rates now will be inflationary. A solid body of economic experts does not agree. And tax cuts adopted over the past three-fourths of a century indicate these economic experts are right. They will not be inflationary. I've had advice that in 1985 our real production in goods and services will grow by 20 percent and be \$300 billion higher than it is today. The average

worker's wage will rise in real purchasing power 8 percent, and this is in after-tax dollars. And this, of course, is predicated on a complete program of tax cuts and spending reductions being implemented.

The other part of the tax package is aimed directly at providing business and industry with the capital needed to modernize and engage in more research and development. This will involve an increase in depreciation allowances, and this part of our tax proposal will be retroactive to January 1st.

The present depreciation system is obsolete, needlessly complex, and economically counterproductive. Very simply, it bases the depreciation of plant machinery and vehicles and tools on their original cost, with no recognition of how inflation has increased their replacement cost. We're proposing a much shorter write-off time than is presently allowed -- a 5-year-write-off for machinery, 3 years for vehicles and trucks, and a 10-year write-off for plant. In fiscal year 1982 under this plan, business would acquire nearly \$10 billion for investment; by 1985, the figure would be nearly 45 billion.

These changes are essential to provide the new investment which is needed to create millions of new jobs between now and 1985 [1986], and to make America competitive once again in the world market. These won't be make-work jobs. They are productive jobs, jobs with a future.

I'm well aware that there are many other desirable and needed tax changes, such as indexing the income tax brackets to protect taxpayers against inflation; the unjust discrimination against married couples if both are working and earning; tuition tax credits; the unfairness of the inheritance tax, especially to the family-owned farm and the family-owned business; and a number of others. But our program for economic recovery is so urgently needed to begin to bring down inflation that I'm asking you to act on this plan first and with great urgency. And then, I pledge I will join with you in seeking these additional tax changes at the earliest date possible.

American society experienced a virtual explosion in government regulation during the past decade. Between 1970 and 1979, expenditures for the major regulatory agencies quadrupled. The number of pages published annually in the Federal Register nearly tripled, and the number of pages in the Code of Federal Regulations increased by nearly two-thirds. The result has been higher prices, higher unemployment, and lower productivity growth. Overregulation causes small and independent business men and women, as well as large businesses to defer or terminate plans for expansion. And since they're responsible for most of the new jobs, those new jobs just aren't created.

Now, we have no intention of dismantling the regulatory agencies, especially those necessary to protect environment and assure the public health and safety. However, we must come to grips with inefficient and burdensome regulations, eliminate those we can and reform the others.

I have asked Vice President Bush to head a Cabinet-level Task Force on Regulatory Relief. Second, I asked each member of my Cabinet to postpone the effective dates of the hundreds of new regulations which have not yet been implemented. Third, in coordination with the Task Force, many of the agency heads have already taken prompt action to review and rescind existing burdensome regulations. And finally, just yesterday I signed an Executive order that for the first time provides for effective and coordinated management of the regulatory process.

Much has been accomplished, but it's only a beginning. We will eliminate those regulations that are unproductive and unnecessary by Executive order where possible and cooperate fully with you on those that require legislation.

The final aspect of our plan requires a national monetary policy which does not allow money growth to increase consistently faster than the growth of goods and services. In order to curb inflation we need to slow the growth in our money supply.

Now, we fully recognize the independence of the Federal Reserve System and will do nothing to interfere with or undermine that independence. We will consult regularly with the Federal Reserve Board on all aspects of our economic program and will vigorously pursue budget policies that'll make their job easier in reducing monetary growth. A successful program to achieve stable and moderate growth patterns in the money supply will keep both inflation and interest rates down and restore vigor to our financial institutions and markets.

This, then, is our proposal -- America's new beginning: a program for economic recovery. I don't want it to be simply the plan of my administration. I'm here tonight to ask you to join me in making it our plan. Together we can embark on this road -- -- [applause].

Thank you very much. I should have arranged to quit right here. [Laughter]

Well, together we can embark on this road, not to make things easy, but to make things better. Our social, political, and cultural, as well as our economic institutions, can no longer absorb the repeated shocks that have been dealt them over the past decades. Can we do the job? The answer is yes. But we must begin now.

We're in control here. There's nothing wrong with America that together we can't fix. I'm sure there'll be some who raise the old familiar cry, "Don't touch my program; cut somewhere else." I hope I've made it plain that our approach has been evenhanded, that only the programs for the truly deserving needy remain untouched. The question is, are we simply going to go down the same path we've gone down before, carving out one special program here, another special program there? I don't think that's what the American people expect of us. More important, I don't think that's what they want. They're ready to return to the source of our strength.

The substance and prosperity of our nation is built by wages brought home from the factories and the mills, the farms, and the shops. They are the services provided in 10,000 corners of America; the interest on the thrift of our people and the returns for their risk-taking. The production of America is the possession of those who build, serve, create, and produce.

For too long now, we've removed from our people the decisions on how to dispose of what they created. We've strayed from first principles. We must alter our course.

The taxing power of government must be used to provide revenues for legitimate government purposes. It must not be used to regulate the economy or bring about social change. We've tried that, and surely we must be able to see it doesn't work.

Spending by government must be limited to those functions which are the proper province of government. We can no longer afford things simply because we think of them. Next year we can reduce the budget by \$41.4 billion, without harm to government's legitimate purposes or to our responsibility to all who need our benevolence. This, plus the reduction in tax rates, will help bring an end to inflation.

In the health and social services area alone, the plan we're proposing will substantially reduce the need for 465 pages of law, 1,400 pages of regulations, 5,000 Federal employees who presently administer 7,600 separate grants in about 25,000 separate locations. Over 7 million man and woman hours of work by State and local officials are required to fill out government forms.

I would direct a question to those who have indicated already an unwillingness to accept such a plan: Have they an alternative which offers a greater chance of balancing the budget, reducing and eliminating inflation, stimulating the creation of jobs, and reducing the tax burden? And, if they haven't, are they suggesting we can continue on the present course without coming to a day of reckoning? If we don't do

this, inflation and the growing tax burden will put an end to everything we believe in and our dreams for the future.

We don't have an option of living with inflation and its attendant tragedy, millions of productive people willing and able to work but unable to find a buyer for their work in the job market. We have an alternative, and that is the program for economic recovery.

True, it'll take time for the favorable effects of our proposal to be felt. So, we must begin now. The people are watching and waiting. They don't demand miracles. They do expect us to act. Let us act together.

Thank you, and good night.

The Associated Press  
April 27, 1981

### **A Vote for Reagan Was A Vote For Economic Program, Bush Says**

#### **DATELINE: NEW YORK**

Congress should pass President Reagan's economic program because Americans in effect voted for it when they voted for him, Vice President Bush said Monday night.

The plan to cut spending and taxes, which received a major boost in Congress Monday, "was tested on the anvil of public opinion in a free election," the vice president told some 1,500 business leaders at an awards dinner sponsored by the Columbia University Business School.

"On the other hand, the so-called 'alternative' programs now being put forward in Washington were arrived at in Washington only by a consensus of a limited number of men in a closed room in these various (congressional) committees."

Reagan "has a far more valid claim to public support in the great debate now taking place in the nation's capital," Bush said.

Bush was referring to an alternative budget plan pushed by the Democratic leadership in the House, which called for a more spending for social programs and less on defense.

But Reagan's plan gained two major victories Monday as House Democratic leaders all but admitted they lack the votes to pass their own budget, and Republican senators neared agreement on a revised plan to complement the administration's tax and spending cuts.

However, the decision on whether Congress will give Reagan the tax cut he wants will come later.

As Reagan prepared to push his program before a joint session of Congress Tuesday night, Bush asked the business community to let Reagan's plan take its course.

"It should and must be given a chance to work," said Bush, who has traveled from coast to coast in recent days promoting the economic recovery package for a recuperating Reagan.

"We have a president who wants to keep his word," said Bush, adding jokingly, "I realize that's a radical concept."

Bush made special notice of Reagan's detailed economic plans given before he was elected, and how that was reflected in the public's "mandate."



"This was not only the meaning but the hope that was fervently expressed by the American people in the mandate they delivered last November," Bush said.

"Few, if any, candidates for president in our history have ever been as specific as Gov. Reagan was last year in both developing and submitting a program to the American people for their approval," Bush said.

"This is to say that when the American people made their choice for president last November, they were voting not simply for a personality or a slogan but for a plan based on these principles (of less taxes and spending) to avert impending economic calamity."

The vice president received an award for government service from the business school, and former General Motors Corp. [sic] Thomas A. Murphy received one for leadership in business.

The Associated Press  
May 4, 1981

### **Bush Says Democratic Leaders Trying To Thwart People's Mandate**

**DATELINE:** WASHINGTON

Vice President George Bush said today the congressional Democratic leadership was trying to "thwart the mandate of the people" by opposing President Reagan's economic package.

In remarks prepared for delivery to the annual meeting of The Associated Press, held in conjunction with the American Newspaper Publishers Association convention in Chicago, the vice president said the president's opponents are suffering "a kind of political amnesia as to the meaning of last November's vote."

He criticized House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, D-Mass., for having said that Americans oppose Reagan's proposed budget cuts.

"It should be noted that this is the same speaker who, after the election, when it became clear that the president meant to carry out his mandate for economic reform, said that sometimes the people don't really know what's good for them.

"Well, perhaps it's that kind of attitude on the part of the established opposition leadership in Washington that's contributed so much to the public's cynicism and lack of confidence in our system in recent years," Bush said.

For his part, O'Neill, asked about Bush's comments, said: "He's doing a good job. He's a robot, right in line with the party."

O'Neill reminded reporters that during last year's presidential campaign, Bush referred to the proposed three-year tax cut Reagan was supporting as "voodoo economics."

The speaker said he reminded Bush of his statement last week when the two sat next to each other listening to Reagan's address to Congress.

"I think the speaker was wrong over the weekend as he was when he expressed the view that the politicians know best what's good for the people. The American people do support the Reagan economic program, today as they did last November."

Bush said Reagan's economic program was spelled out in such detail during the presidential campaign "that no one who followed last year's campaign can doubt that when the majority of the American people cast their ballots for Governor Reagan, they knew exactly what he stood for and what he proposed to do to save our country from economic disaster."

He said the reason for the economic trouble was "the economic policies of the past -- the economic policies fathered by the very opposition leadership that now is trying to obstruct President Reagan's program and in effect thwart the mandate of the people."

Bush called the opponents of the president's program "obstructionists," who were "echoes of past policies of tax and spend, of bureaucratic waste and excess -- if they were to succeed in their efforts, what then? The speaker claims knowledge of what the people really want: Do he and those who follow his course claim that what the people want is a return to the failed policies produced by Democratic control over both houses of Congress for 46 of the past 50 years?"

"If that's what they believe, then I'm afraid they're sadly out of touch with the thinking of the American people, and indeed, the new spirit of America."

He said Reagan's program reflects "faith in the future, and above all, faith in the capacity of the American people to do whatever is needed to make this a better, more prosperous society -- a free society in a world at peace."

### **Presidential Speech on Economic Recovery Program**

April 28, 1981

[Applause] You wouldn't want to talk me into an encore, would you? [Laughter] Mr. Speaker, Mr. President, distinguished Members of the Congress, honored guests, and fellow citizens: I have no words to express my appreciation for that—that greeting. I have—I have come to speak to you tonight about our economic recovery program and why I believe it's essential that the Congress approve this package, which I believe will lift the crushing burden of inflation off of our citizens and restore the vitality to our economy and our industrial machine.

First, however, and due to events of the past few weeks, will you permit me to digress for a moment from the all-important subject of why we must bring government spending under control and reduce tax rates? I'd like to say a few words directly to all of you and to those who are watching and listening tonight, because this is the only way I know to express to all of you on behalf of Nancy and myself our appreciation for your messages and flowers and, most of all, your prayers, not only for me but for those others who fell beside me. The warmth of your words, the expression of friendship and, yes, love, meant more to us than you can ever know. You have given us a memory that we'll treasure forever. And you've provide—provided an answer to those few voices that were raised saying that what happened was evidence that ours is a sick society.

The society we heard from is made up of millions of compassionate Americans and their children, from college-age to kindergarten. As a matter of fact, as evidence of that I have a letter with me. The letter came from Peter Sweeney. He's in the second grade in the Riverside School in Rockville Centre, and he said, "I hope you get well quick or you might have to make a speech in your pajamas." [Laughter] And he—he added a postscript. "P.S. If you have to make a speech in your pajamas, I warned you." [Laughter]

Well, sick societies don't produce men like the two who recently returned from outer space. Sick societies don't produce young men like Secret Service agent Tim McCarthy, who placed his body—he placed his body between mine and the man with the gun simply because he felt that's what his duty called for him to do. Sick societies don't produce dedicated police officers like Tom Delahanty or able and devoted public servants like Jim Brady. Sick societies don't make people like us so proud to be Americans and so very proud of our fellow citizens.

Now, let's talk about getting spending and inflation under control and cutting your tax rates. Mr. Speaker and Senator Baker, I want to thank you for your cooperation in helping to arrange this joint session of the

Congress. I won't be speaking to you very long tonight, but I asked for this meeting because the urgency of our joint mission has not changed. Thanks to some very fine people, my—my health is much improved. I'd like to be able to say that with regard to the health of the economy.

It's been half a year since the election that charged all of us in this government with the task of restoring our economy. And where have we come in this six months? Inflation, as measured by the Consumer Price Index, has continued at a double-digit rate. Mortgage interest rates have averaged almost 15 percent for these six months, preventing families across America from buying homes. There are still almost eight million unemployed. The average worker's hourly earnings after adjusting for inflation are lower today than they were six months ago, and there have been over 6,000 business failures.

Six months is long enough. The American people now want us to act and not in half-measures. They demand and they've earned a full and comprehensive effort to clean up our economic mess. Because of the extent of our economy's sickness, we know that the cure will not come quickly and that even with our package, progress will come in inches and feet, not in miles. But to fail to act will delay even longer and more painfully the cure which must come. And that cure begins with the federal budget. And the budgetary actions taken by the Congress over the next few days will determine how we respond to the message of last November 4th. That message was very simple. Our government is too big, and it spends too much.

For the last few months, you and I have enjoyed a relationship based on extraordinary cooperation. Because of this cooperation we've come a long distance in less than three months. I want to thank the leadership of the Congress for helping in setting a fair timetable for consideration of our recommendations. And committee chairmen on both sides of the aisle have called prompt and thorough hearings. We have also communicated in a spirit of candor, openness, and mutual respect. Tonight, as our decision day nears and as the House of Representatives weighs its alternatives, I wish to address you in that same spirit.

The Senate Budget Committee, under the leadership of Pete Domenici, has just today voted out a budget resolution supported by Democrats and Republicans alike that is in all major respects consistent with the program that we have proposed. Now we look forward to favorable action on the Senate floor, but an equally crucial test involves the House of Representatives. The House will soon be choosing between two different versions or measures to deal with the economy. One is the measure offered by the House Budget Committee. The other is a bipartisan measure, a substitute introduced by Congressmen Phil Gramm of Texas and Del Latta of Ohio.

On behalf of the administration, let me say that we embrace and fully support that bipartisan substitute. It will achieve all the essential aims of controlling government spending, reducing the tax burden, building a national defense second to none, and stimulating economic growth and creating millions of new jobs. At the same time, however, I must state our opposition to the measure offered by the House Budget Committee. It may appear that we have two alternatives. In reality, however, there are no more alternatives left.

The committee measure quite simply falls far too short of the essential actions that we must take. For example, in the next three years, the committee measure projects spending \$141 billion more than does the bipartisan substitute. It regrettably cuts over \$14 billion in essential defense spending, funding required to restore America's national security. It adheres to the failed policy of trying to balance the budget on the taxpayer's back. It would increase tax payments over a third, adding up to a staggering quarter of a trillion dollars. Federal taxes would increase 12 percent each year. Taxpayers would be paying a larger share of their income to the government in 1984 than they do at present. In short, that measure reflects an echo of the past rather than a benchmark for the future. High taxes and excess spending growth created our present economic mess; more of the same will not cure the hardship, anxiety, and discouragement it has imposed on the American people.

Let us cut through the fog for a moment. The answer to a government that's too big is to stop feeding its growth. Government spending has been growing faster than the economy itself. The massive national debt which we accumulated is the result of the government's high spending diet. Well, it's time to change the diet and to change it in the right way.

I know the tax portion of our package is of concern to some of you. Let me make a few points that I think—feel have been overlooked. First of all, it should be looked at as an integral part of the entire package, not something separate and apart from the budget reductions, the regulatory relief, and the monetary restraints. Probably the most common misconception is that we are proposing to reduce government revenues to less than what the government has been receiving. This is not true. Actually, the discussion has to do with how much of a tax increase should be imposed on the taxpayer in 1982.

Now, I know that over the recess in some informal polling some of your constituents have been asked which they'd rather have, a balanced budget or a tax cut, and with the common sense that characterizes the people of this country, the answer, of course, has been a balanced budget. But may I suggest, with no inference that there was wrong intent on the part of those who asked the question, the question was inappropriate to the situation. Our choice is not between a balanced budget and a tax cut. Properly asked, the question is, "Do you want a great big raise in your taxes this coming year or, at the worst, a very little increase with the prospect of tax reduction and a balanced budget down the road a ways?" With the common sense that the people have already shown, I'm sure we all know what the answer to that question would be.

A gigantic tax increase has been built into the system. We propose nothing more than a reduction of that increase. The people have a right to know that even with our plan they will be paying more in taxes, but not as much more as they will without it. The—the option, I believe, offered by the House Budget Committee, will leave spending too high and tax rates too high. At the same time, I think it cuts the defense budget too much, and by attempting to reduce the deficit through higher taxes, it will not create the kind of strong economic growth and the new jobs that we must have.

Let us not overlook the fact that the small, independent business man or woman creates more than 80 percent of all the new jobs and employs more than half of our total work force. Our across-the-board cut in tax rates for a three-year period will give them much of the incentive and promise of stability they need to go forward with expansion plans calling for additional employees.

Tonight, I renew my call for us to work as a team, to join in cooperation so that we find answers which will begin to solve all our economic problems and not just some of them. The economic recovery package that I've outlined to you over the past weeks is, I deeply believe, the only answer that we have left. Reducing the growth of spending, cutting marginal tax rates, providing relief from overregulation, and following a noninflationary and predictable monetary policy are interwoven measures which will ensure that we have addressed each of the severe dislocations which threaten our economic future. These policies will make our economy stronger, and the stronger economy will balance the budget, which we're committed to do by 1984.

When I took the oath of office, I pledged loyalty to only one special interest group—"We the People." Those people—neighbors and friends, shopkeepers and laborers, farmers and craftsmen—do not have infinite patience. As a matter of fact, some 80 years ago, Teddy Roosevelt wrote these instructive words in his first message to the Congress: "The American people are slow to wrath, but when their wrath is once kindled, it burns like a consuming flame." Well, perhaps that kind of wrath will be deserved if our answer to these serious problems is to repeat the mistakes of the past.

The old and comfortable way is to shave a little here and a little there. Well, that's not acceptable anymore. I think this great and historic Congress knows that way is no longer acceptable. [Applause] Thank you very much. Thank you. I think you've shown that you know the one sure way to continue the inflationary

spiral is to fall back into the predictable patterns of old economic practices. Isn't it time that we tried something new? When—when you allowed me to speak to you here in these chambers a little earlier, I told you that I wanted this program for economic recovery to be ours—yours and mine. I think the bipartisan substitute bill has achieved that purpose. It moves us toward economic vitality.

Just two weeks ago, you and I joined millions of our fellow Americans in marveling at the magic historical moment that John Young and Bob Crippen created in their space shuttle Columbia. The last manned effort was almost six years ago, and I remembered on this more recent day, over how—over the years, how we'd all come to expect technological precision of our men and machines. And each amazing achievement became commonplace, until the next new challenge was raised. With the space shuttle we tested our ingenuity once again, moving beyond the accomplishments of the past into the promise and uncertainty of the future. Thus, we not only planned to send up a 122-foot aircraft 170 miles into space, but we also intended to make it maneuverable and return it to earth, landing 98 tons of exotic metals delicately on a remote, dry lake bed. The space shuttle did more than prove our technological abilities. It raised our expectations once more. It started us dreaming again.

The poet Carl Sandburg wrote, "The republic is a dream. Nothing happens unless first a dream." And that's what makes us, as Americans, different. We've always reached for a new spirit and aimed at a higher goal. We've been courageous and determined, unafraid and bold. Who among us wants to be first to say we no longer have those qualities, that we must limp along, doing the same things that have brought us our present misery? I believe that the people you and I represent are ready to chart a new course. They look to us to meet the great challenge, to reach beyond the commonplace and not fall short for lack of creativity or courage. Someone, you know, has said that he who would have nothing to do with thorns must never attempt to gather flowers. Well, we have much greatness before us. We can restore our economic strength and build opportunities like none we've ever had before. As Carl Sandburg said, all we need to begin with is a dream that we can do better than before. All we need to have is faith, and that dream will come true. All we need to do is act, and the time for action is now. Thank you. Good night.

The Associated Press  
April 29, 1981

### **A Setting Hollywood Couldn't Have Matched**

By WALTER R. MEARS, AP Special Correspondent

DATELINE: WASHINGTON

In a setting and a situation Hollywood couldn't have matched, President Reagan crowned his first 100 days -- and his comeback from a bullet wound -- by telling Congress it is time to adopt his spending and tax prescription as the one and only cure for a sick economy.

Reagan is convinced the voters are on his side, and he made sure nobody forgot it.

The words were familiar, but the situation made them special as the president renewed his personal campaign for the economic program he insists is "the only answer we have left."

The performance was a guaranteed hit, with the leading man making his first address since the attempt on his life on March 30. The scene was standard: the House chamber, before a joint session of Congress, in the glare of television lights for the cameras that beamed the nation its first real look at Reagan since the shooting. There was no outward sign of the chest wound he suffered four weeks ago. He grasped hands, clapped backs along the aisle as he came and went from the 27-minute appearance.

In circumstances like those Tuesday night, an amateur would have been a star. And Reagan is a pro.

While he is likely to gain congressional backing for his budget cuts, the House and Senate votes just ahead do not necessarily foretell the final outcome.

He probably will have to compromise later on his three-year, 30 percent tax reduction plan, although there is no sign of that now. Compromise is not the mood at the White House, not with a recovered Reagan riding high in the polls, and with leading Democrats conceding that the voters want his budget bidding done.

Reagan underscored that mood, dismissing Democratic alternatives as just about useless.

"The American people now want us to act, and not in half measures," Reagan said. "They demand -- and they have earned -- a full and comprehensive effort to clean up our economic mess."

Not many days ago, Reagan lieutenants were worried that the drive for his economic program was slowing if not stalling. They said the absence of the convalescing president was a serious setback in the effort to sell his proposals.

They don't think so now. House Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill Jr. has virtually conceded that the Democrats cannot stop Reagan's budget cuts even in the House they control.

Reagan's personal popularity has soared in the public opinion polls since the assassination attempt that wounded him. Politically, he is as strong right now as a president can be.

For all of that, for all the drama, and despite the signs of an administration victory in the first major votes on the budget, there is a long legislative road ahead for Reagan and his lobbyists. The measures he is pushing now are resolutions that set the congressional budget. Still to come are the separate appropriations bills that actually fix spending levels for individual programs. That is where the opposition will try to rally.

It will be a long and difficult process. There is a lot of lobbying, and probably some vetoing, yet to come.

Actually, Reagan already has won on the concept of budget cutting. Even in the unlikely event that the House adopted the Democratic resolution, it would call for most of the cuts he wants, although with a shift in austerity targets and a smaller increase in defense spending.

Reagan said that would not be nearly good enough. He wants his cuts, all of them, and his three-year tax bill, not the one-year plan the Democrats have presented. He said it is the only way to go, "there are no more alternatives left."

The tax cut is the issue on which Democrats most likely will make their stand, later in the congressional season. So Reagan paid special attention to that phase of his program.

"It should be looked at as an integral part of the entire package, not something separate and apart from the budget reductions, the regulatory relief and the monetary restraints," he said.

Reagan said the Democratic version would leave taxes too high, and would not produce the jobs and economic growth his plan would. "Tonight I renew my call for us to work as a team, to join in cooperation so that we will find answers which will begin to solve all our economic problems and not just some," he said.

And for any straying Republicans or wavering Democrats who don't buy that, Reagan had a warning: To do less than he demands will invite the wrath of the voters.

"Perhaps that kind of wrath will be deserved if our answer to these serious problems is to repeat the mistakes of the past," he said. "The old and comfortable way is to shave a little here and add a little there.

"Well, that's not acceptable any more."

ABC World News Tonight  
August 13, 1981

### **Reagan Signs Tax and Budget Cut Bill and Speaks Out Against Soviets**

FRANK REYNOLDS

It was supposed to be a pleasant ceremony, the signing of 2 bills that President Reagan fought hard to get through Congress, but there was nothing pleasant or conciliatory in his remarks today about the air traffic controllers or in his reaction to the latest Soviet criticism of him. We have a report from White House correspondent Sam Donaldson.

SAM DONALDSON

1600 Pennsylvania Avenue? Hardly, instead the President's Rancho Del Cielo is spread across a mountaintop near Santa Barbara. A mountain covered this morning with fog, photographers and reporters, the Reagan dogs and horses and 2 thick bundles of paper ordering the most massive tax and budget cuts in the country's history. Signed into law with 22 pens and some optimistic words.

PRESIDENT REAGAN

This represents 130 billion dollars in savings over the next 3 years. This represents 750 billion dollars in tax cuts over the next 5 years. And this is only the beginning.

SAM DONALDSON

With the dogs restrained and pages of the new laws flapping in his face, the President took questions for several minutes. "No," he said he won't resume negotiations with the terminated air controllers.

PRESIDENT REAGAN

We are rebuilding the system now. In view of the action of those controllers who decided to violate their oath and to violate the law and I just don't see any way that it could be expected that we could now just go back and pretend that they weren't breaking the law or breaking their oath.

SAM DONALDSON

On the Soviet Union's charge today that his foreign policy is one of sheer insanity which could lead to war, the President heatedly disagreed.

PRESIDENT REAGAN

What we are in is a situation where we're being realistic about their military buildup which has gone on unchecked in spite of all the meetings having to do with arms control and so forth and I can understand their anguish, they're squealing like they're sitting on a sharp nail simply because we now are showing the will that we're not going to let them get to the point of dominance where they can someday issue to the free world an ultimatum of surrender or die and they don't like that.

SAM DONALDSON

The President defended his decision to manufacture the neutron warhead saying it is a defensive weapon which would be deployed in Europe only after extensive consultations with allied governments. Mr. Reagan said that if Soviet President Brezhnev really wants peace, and he has already offered to sit down with Brezhnev and discuss it.

PRESIDENT REAGAN

And I suggested that maybe we might sit down sometime and see what it was the people really wanted. I doubt that the people have ever started a war.

SAM DONALDSON

The President seemed in a upbeat mood today answering questions with the confidence sometimes lacking in the past. Kidding around with the press, even his wife Nancy entering into the spirit of the country atmosphere. How much will you take for the place?

PRESIDENT REAGAN

Huh?

SAM DONALDSON

How much will you take for the place?

PRESIDENT REAGAN

Oh, You can't sell heaven. [LAUGHTER]

SAM DONALDSON

The picture here was one of warmth and joviality with dogs and children and good natured kidding around, but the words that count from the President today were cold and unyielding as he continues his hard line toward the air traffic controllers and particularly toward the Soviet Union. Sam Donaldson, ABC News, on the President's ranch in California.



“The Reagan Economic Program: Selected Budget Cuts.” Heritage Foundation backgrounder report. April 29, 1981. Available at: <http://www.heritage.org/research/all-research.aspx?categories=report>

“Tax Policy and the Economy: A Debate Between Michael Harrington and Representative Jack Kemp.” April 29, 1979. Available at: <http://www.archive.org/details/TaxPolicyAndTheEconomyADebateBetweenMichaelHarringtonAnd>

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### **Content Analytic Scheme (Chapter 6):**

#### *Story Focus Codes:*

**Government Spending/Taxation** (impact on/implications for public spending and taxation issues, government programs in general)

**Class Implications** (impact on/implications for various income or socioeconomic class groupings)

**Racial Implications** (impact on/implications for various racial or ethnic groups, or for race relations and related issues generally)

**Gender/Family Implications** (impact on/implications for women, children, teenaged girls, and sexual, gender or family issues generally)

**Procedure/Strategy/Tactics** (internal governmental procedure; political jockeying, strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)

**Macroeconomics** (effects on/implications for broader economy)

#### *Source ID Codes:*

Administration  
 Democratic Party  
 Republican Party  
 Conservative Interest Group/SMO  
 Progressive Interest Group/SMO  
 Research Organization/Academia  
 State/Local Government (w/ no partisan ID)  
 Federal Bureaucracy  
 Ordinary Citizen

#### *Frame Codes:*

(Note: messages that favor neoliberal-New Right perspectives are in bold; those that counter this ideological current are underlined; the remaining are neutral, unclear or ambivalent):

**Fed Government Programs (general-con)** (domestic social/regulatory programs presented in an unfavorable light; need to cut or reduce growth of funding for them)

Fed Government Programs (general-pro) (domestic social/regulatory programs presented in a favorable light; need to preserve or increase funding for them)

**Work Ethic/Dependency** (welfare programs harm the work ethic, cause pathological dependency)

**Work Ethic/Dependency (racial)** (welfare programs harm the work ethic, cause pathological dependency specifically among minority groups)

**Anti-Tax** (welfare reform will reduce taxes)

**Gender (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help women or sex/gender relations)

Gender (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm women or sex/gender relations)

**Children (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help children or families)

Children (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm children or families)

**Urban Communities (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help city neighborhoods)

Urban Communities (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm city neighborhoods)

**Macroeconomics (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will help the broader economy)

Macroeconomics (anti-reform) (welfare reform will harm the broader economy)

Job Creation (policy should focus on increasing quantity or quality of employment opportunities)

**Out-of-Wedlock Births (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will reduce out-of-wedlock births)

Job Training (policy should focus on employment-training and education)

Increase Poverty (anti-reform) (welfare reform will increase poverty)

**Decrease Poverty (pro-reform)** (welfare reform will decrease poverty)

Procedure/Strategy/Tactics (internal legislative procedure/process; internal political jockeying/strategic and tactical calculations; lobbying and public relations machinations)

General Concern for Poor (government generally should focus on reducing poverty)

Out-of-Wedlock Births (anti-reform) (policy focus on out-of-wedlock births is misplaced or misleading)

Work Ethic/Dependency (anti-reform) (welfare programs do not harm the work ethic, cause pathological dependency)

**Immigrant Restrict (pro-)** (immigrants should have limited or no access to welfare benefits)

Immigrant Restrict (anti-) (immigrants should have full access to welfare benefits)

Pro-“transitional” social services (other) (policy should focus on child-care, transportation and other programs to help welfare recipients obtain and maintain wage work)

***Information Designation Codes:***

**Welfare Budget** (*any information indicating the proportion or percentage of the federal budget spent on cash welfare*)

**Racial Composition** (*any information indicating the proportion or percentage of welfare recipients in various racial or ethnic groups*)

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**Textual Artifacts (Chapter 7):**

The Contract With America and the ten bills the GOP Congress proposed in 1995 are available here:

<http://www.house.gov/house/Contract/CONTRACT.htmlwe>.

Major speeches by President Clinton are available here:

[http://cstlcla.semo.edu/renka/modern\\_presidents/clinton\\_speeches.htm](http://cstlcla.semo.edu/renka/modern_presidents/clinton_speeches.htm)

For other texts, please refer to the reference information in Chapter 7.

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**Notes and Materials for the Media Effects Experiment (Chapter 8):*****Sample and Protocol:***

Participants consisted of 115 adults from the area in and around Syracuse, N.Y. I recruited participants through email lists and an announcement website reaching Syracuse University staff members; fliers posted on and near campus on indoor and outdoor bulletin boards and public bus stops; and a word-of-mouth snowball sampling process. I conducted the experiment in a university classroom and conference room in 15 sessions over the months of November and December 2010. I paid participants \$15 cash each upon conclusion of the study, and provided complimentary non-alcoholic beverages during administration of the survey.

My sample was 67.8 percent female, 32.2 percent male. Nearly 81 percent of participants identified their race as Caucasian or white; 9.6 percent identified as African-American or black; 1.7 percent identified as Asian-American; and 0.9 percent as Hispanic or Latino. The remainder of participants — 6.6 percent — identified as “other.” The modal age category — which comprised just over 33 percent of the sample — was 46-55, and no participant was older than 65. The modal education category — which made up 33.9 percent of the sample — was a bachelor’s degree; 98.3 percent had at least a high school diploma or GED and 60.9 percent had at least a bachelor’s degree. The distribution of annual household-income levels in my sample had two peaks, each comprising 18.3 percent of participants — \$30,000 to \$39,999 and \$60,000 to \$74,999; 50.4 percent of the sample reported annual household incomes ranging from \$30,000 to \$74,999. However, my sample was not disproportionately weighted toward the top end of the income scale:

18.4 percent of participants reported household incomes of \$100,000 or greater, compared to 15.7 percent of the U.S. population as a whole. My sample was substantially more female, significantly — though not overwhelmingly — whiter, somewhat older, had attained many more years of formal schooling, and had significantly — though not overwhelmingly — higher levels of income than is the norm in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Of those in my sample who identified as Republican, Democratic or Independent (a small number preferred another party or misunderstood the two-part question prompt), 66.4 percent reported that they were Democrats, 27.1 percent Republicans and 6.5 percent (“pure”) Independents. According to the most recent American National Election Studies data, the comparable numbers nationwide are 51 percent Democrat, 38 percent Republican and 11 percent independent.<sup>2</sup> Self-identified liberals made up 49.5 percent of my sample, conservatives comprised 21.5 percent and moderates made up 29 percent. According to the NES, the comparable numbers in the United States as a whole are 22 percent liberal, 57 percent conservative and 22 percent moderate.<sup>3</sup>

#### ***Randomization Procedure:***

I used a two-step process to randomly assign participants to experimental conditions. First, I manually shuffled the entire stack of 120 surveys so that the three conditions were haphazardly distributed throughout the stack. I followed by assigning a unique number to each survey. Then I used a computerized random-number generator to produce a set of digits ranging from 1 through 120. I used this list as a guide by which to pull individual surveys from the stack for use in each particular experimental session, beginning with the first number on the list and proceeding as indicated.

#### ***Composite Variables:***

I constructed a measure of *general political knowledge* by creating a composite variable from four questions about national political actors, institutions and processes, drawn from a standard battery frequently used in academic surveys. Questions measured: 1) ability to identify Joe Biden as

<sup>1</sup> According to U.S. Census Bureau estimates for 2005-2009 (2010 data were not available at the time of the study), the population was 50.7 percent female, 49.3 percent male; the median age for U.S. residents was 36.3 years; 84.6 percent of the population who was 25 or older had at least a high school degree, and 27.5 percent of this group had at least a bachelor's degree; median household income (in 2009 inflation-adjusted dollars) was \$51,425. See:

[http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFFacts?\\_event=&geo\\_id=01000US&\\_geoContext=01000US&\\_street=&\\_county=&\\_cityTown=&\\_state=&\\_zip=&\\_lang=en&\\_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&\\_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&\\_subme\\_nuId=factsheet\\_1&ds\\_name=DEC\\_2000\\_SAFF&\\_ci\\_nbr=null&qtr\\_name=null&reg=null%3Anull&\\_keyword=&\\_industry=](http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/ACSSAFFFacts?_event=&geo_id=01000US&_geoContext=01000US&_street=&_county=&_cityTown=&_state=&_zip=&_lang=en&_sse=on&ActiveGeoDiv=&_useEV=&pctxt=fph&pgsl=010&_subme_nuId=factsheet_1&ds_name=DEC_2000_SAFF&_ci_nbr=null&qtr_name=null&reg=null%3Anull&_keyword=&_industry=)

<sup>2</sup> See: [http://www.electionstudies.org/nsguide/toptable/tab2a\\_1.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nsguide/toptable/tab2a_1.htm).

<sup>3</sup> See: [http://www.electionstudies.org/nsguide/toptable/tab3\\_1.htm](http://www.electionstudies.org/nsguide/toptable/tab3_1.htm).

vice president, 2) knowledge of the role of the Supreme Court, 3) knowledge of the congressional vote proportion needed to override a presidential veto, and 4) ability to identify the majority party in the House of Representatives. I categorized scores of zero on this variable as indicating low political knowledge (zero or one question correct), scores of 1 as indicating moderate political knowledge (two or three questions correct), and scores of 2 as indicating high political knowledge (all four questions correct). I chose this relatively stringent approach because one of the four questions (on the Supreme Court) was multiple choice, and two of the remaining three concerned a major political figure (the vice president) and the aggregate results of a recent high-profile national election (the Republican takeover of the House of Representatives, which received frequent news coverage around the time of the survey).

I constructed a measure of *policy-specific knowledge* by creating a composite variable from four questions about national tax and social welfare policy in the contemporary historical context. Questions concerned: 1) the relative burden of various types of federal taxes on lower- and lower-middle-income families, 2) the change in total federal tax rates over the last 30 years for families with less than \$200,000 in gross annual income, 3) the percentage of the annual federal budget that pays for the food stamp program, and 4) the percentage of the federal budget that pays for TANF (cash welfare). I categorized scores of zero on this variable as indicating low policy-specific knowledge (zero or one question correct), scores of 1 as indicating moderate policy-specific knowledge (two questions correct), and scores of 2 as indicating high policy-specific knowledge (three or four questions correct). My coding of this measure was somewhat less stringent because policy-specific knowledge is typically less widespread than is general political knowledge among the U.S. population. All four items were multiple-choice, and the questions on food stamps and TANF simply tapped knowledge of the broad magnitude of federal spending on these programs. Still, no one in my sample of 115 participants answered all four questions correctly, and almost no one could correctly indicate spending on both food stamps and TANF.

I constructed a measure of *socioeconomic egalitarianism* by creating a composite variable from five questions measuring: 1) participants' level of concern about the rising economic inequality of the last 30 years, 2) participants' beliefs about the causes of economic inequality, 3) participants' faith in government versus private enterprise to solve complex social and economic problems, 4) participants' beliefs about the federal income tax obligations of wealthy people, and 5) participants' beliefs about the collective social responsibility to ensure that all people have equal economic opportunity. Scores on this variable could range from 0 to 11, with lower numbers indicating stronger egalitarian values.

While none of these indicators by itself constitutes a sufficient measure of socioeconomic egalitarianism, combining all five is a reasonable way to tap this value-orientation. Answers to the

first, second and fourth questions listed above were weighted more heavily in the analysis because of their centrality to class politics and economic/social welfare policy in the historical context of my study. The extent to which people believe that rising inequality is a problem that ought to be — or even can be — addressed is a key dimension related to both the causes and consequences of the rightward turn of the last 30 years. People’s beliefs about why material status is unequal (i.e., natural differences in ability, initiative and individual choice versus social-structural impediments, discrimination and government policy) constitute core philosophical principles — tapping elements of popular common sense — that are highly relevant to the political discourse of the New Right, its allies and its opponents during the neoliberal era. And the extent to which the wealthy should bear the cost of government programs that provide collective benefits, mitigate economic inequality and provide a measure of protection against market discipline and deprivations has been a key point of contention in recent decades.

*Survey Instrument:*

**Please answer all the following questions IN ORDER. Please DO NOT go back to previous questions. Circle your answers, or fill in the blank where indicated. This survey is ENTIRELY ANONYMOUS, and your name or other personal information WILL NOT be associated in any way with your answers.**

How many days in the past week did you watch the **national** network news on TV (i.e. ABC, CBS or NBC)?

- A. None.
- B. One.
- C. Two.
- D. Three
- E. Four.
- F. Five or more.

How many days in the past week did you read about national politics in a **daily newspaper** (in either online or in print form)?

- A. None.
- B. One.
- C. Two.
- D. Three.
- E. Four.
- F. Five or more.

Do you generally **approve** or **disapprove** of the way Barack Obama is handling his job as president?

- A. Approve.
- B. Disapprove.

Do you generally **approve** or **disapprove** of the way Barack Obama is handling the **economy**?

- A. Approve.
- B. Disapprove.

Here is a seven-point scale on which the political views that people might hold are arranged from “extremely liberal” to “extremely conservative.” Where would you place **yourself** on this scale?

- A. Extremely liberal.
- B. Liberal.
- C. Slightly liberal.
- D. Moderate or middle-of-the road.
- E. Slightly conservative.
- F. Conservative.
- G. Extremely conservative.
- H. I haven’t thought much about this.

Generally speaking, do you usually think of yourself as a **Democrat**, a **Republican**, or what?

- A. Democrat.
- B. Republican.
- C. Independent.
- D. Other party.

If you consider yourself a Republican or a Democrat, would you call yourself a **strong Republican**, a **not very strong Republican**, a **strong Democrat**, or a **not very strong Democrat**?

- A. Strong Republican.
- B. Not very strong Republican.
- C. Strong Democrat.
- D. Not very strong Democrat.

If you consider yourself an **independent**, do you think of yourself as **closer** to the Democratic Party or **closer** to the Republican Party?

- A. Closer to the Democratic Party.
- B. Closer to the Republican Party.
- C. Neither.

Are you currently **registered** to vote?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

Did you **vote** in the recent November national elections?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

About **how old** are you?

- A. 18-25.
- B. 26-35.
- C. 36-45.
- D. 46-55.
- E. 56-65.
- F. 66-75.
- G. 76 or older.

How much **formal education** have you completed?

- A. Less than a high school diploma or GED.
- B. High school diploma or GED.
- C. Some college or trade/professional school.
- D. An associate's (usually two-year) degree.
- E. A bachelor's (usually four-year) degree.
- F. A master's degree.
- G. A doctoral, law or similar advanced degree.

Do you belong to a **labor union**?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

Please indicate which category shows the total gross **annual income** for all people living in your household.

- A. Up to \$19,999.
- B. \$20,000 to \$29,999.
- C. \$30,000 to \$39,999.
- D. \$40,000 to \$49,999.
- E. \$50,000 to \$59,999.
- F. \$60,000 to \$74,999.
- G. \$75,000 to \$99,999.
- H. \$100,000 to \$149,999.
- I. \$150,000 to \$199,999.
- J. \$200,000 or more.



What racial or ethnic category best describes you?

- A. African-American or black.
- B. Hispanic or Latino.
- C. Asian-American.
- D. Caucasian or white.
- E. Other.

Are you a man or a woman?

- A. Man.
- B. Woman.

About how many days during the past week have you **discussed national politics** with family, friends, neighbors, coworkers or other people (i.e. face-to-face, over the phone or online, such as through instant messaging)?

- A. None.
- B. One.
- C. Two.
- D. Three.
- E. Four.
- F. Five or more.

Do you belong to any kind of a **political or issue organization** (i.e. local, state or national; conservative, liberal or otherwise)?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

Have you attended any kind of **political protest, demonstration or rally** during the past year (i.e. in your community or somewhere else; liberal, conservative or otherwise)?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

Over the last quarter-century, the wealthiest one percent of Americans has seen their incomes increase by more than 200 percent, whereas those of low-income people have increased by only 9 percent and those of middle-income people, by just 15 percent. Do you see this trend — in other words, **rising economic inequality** — as a **serious problem, somewhat of a problem, not much of a problem, not a problem**, or haven't you thought much about this?

- A. Serious problem.
- B. Somewhat of a problem.
- C. Not much of a problem.
- D. Not a problem.

Why do you think some people have better jobs and higher incomes than others? Please choose the **two** most important reasons from the list below.

- A. Some people don't work as hard as others, or they just choose low-paying jobs.
- B. Some people have more natural ability to learn.
- C. Some people have disadvantages that hold them back; for example, they don't get a chance to get a good education, they face discrimination, or they have a difficult family life.
- D. Government policies help high-income people more than low- or middle-income people.

Please choose which of the following two statements comes **closer** to your own view: "We need a strong government to handle today's complex economic problems" or "Private enterprise can handle these problems without government being involved."

- A. Strong government.
- B. Private enterprise.

Do you think that wealthy people are asked to pay **more than they should** in federal income taxes, **about the right amount**, or **less than they should**?

- A. More than they should.
- B. About the right amount.
- C. Less than they should.

Please indicate the extent to which you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statement: "Our society should do whatever is necessary to make sure that everyone has an equal chance at economic success."

- A. Strongly agree.
- B. Somewhat agree.
- C. Somewhat disagree.
- D. Strongly disagree.

***Now, here are a few questions about the government in Washington and about issues that are often discussed there. Many people don't know the answers to these questions, so if there are some you don't know, please just indicate that and move on.***

Do you happen to know what job or political office is now held by Joe Biden?

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Whose responsibility is it to determine if a law is constitutional or not?

- A. The president.
- B. Congress.
- C. The Supreme Court.
- D. Don't know.

How much of a majority is required for the U.S. Senate and House to override a presidential veto?

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Do you happen to know which major political party will have the most members in the House of Representatives during 2011?

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Which federal tax typically requires families who make **less than** \$50,000 a year to pay out the largest percentage of their gross income?

- A. Income tax.
- B. Capital gains tax.
- C. Payroll (i.e. Social Security and Medicare) tax.
- D. Estate tax.
- E. None of these.
- F. Don't know.

Which of the following accurately describes how the total federal tax rate paid by families that make **less than** \$200,000 a year has changed in the last 30 years?

- A. Increased.
- B. Decreased.
- C. Remained about the same.
- D. Don't know.

Do you happen to know about **how much of the total federal budget** each year is spent on **food stamps** (a program to help low-income people purchase groceries)?

- A. 25 percent
- B. 1.5 percent
- C. 10 percent
- D. 5 percent
- E. Don't know.

Do you happen to know about **how much of the total federal budget** each year is spent on **Temporary Assistance to Needy Families** (a program — also known as “welfare” — that provides monthly grants to low-income people, mostly single mothers)?

- A. 20 percent
- B. 1 percent
- C. 30 percent
- D. 0.5 percent
- E. Don't know.

Among the following sports, which one do you watch most on television?

- A. Baseball
- B. Basketball
- C. Football
- D. Hockey
- E. Motor sports (NASCAR, Formula 1, IRL, etc.)
- F. Fight sports (wrestling, boxing, etc.)
- G. Soccer
- H. Other
- I. I don't watch sports on television

What is your position on the new economic plan that is being debated by politicians in Washington?

- A. Favor strongly.
- B. Favor somewhat.
- C. Oppose somewhat.
- D. Oppose strongly.
- E. Don't know/no opinion.

Please indicate the extent to which you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statement: "Politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what's going on."

- A. Agree strongly.
- B. Agree somewhat.
- C. Disagree somewhat.
- D. Disagree strongly.

Please indicate the extent to which you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statement: "Public officials don't care much what people like me think."

- A. Agree strongly.
- B. Agree somewhat.
- C. Disagree somewhat.
- D. Disagree strongly.

Which of these kinds of movie do you most enjoy watching?

- A. Comedy
- B. Drama
- C. Romance
- D. Action/Adventure
- E. Horror
- F. Science fiction
- G. Documentary
- H. Other
- I. I don't watch movies

How often do you follow news about celebrities, by reading magazines, watching television shows, visiting Internet sites or using other sources?

- A. Every day
- B. A few times a week
- C. Once a week
- D. Once every few weeks
- E. Less often than this
- F. Never

***Now that you are finished, please raise your hand and we will collect this part of the survey.***

***Now, please read this newspaper story and answer the questions that follow. You may refer back to the story as you answer the questions after it.***

What is your position on the new economic plan that is being debated by politicians in Washington?

- A. Favor strongly.
- B. Favor somewhat.
- C. Oppose somewhat.
- D. Oppose strongly.
- E. Don't know/no opinion.

Quick!! Without thinking, please list in the spaces below the ideas that came to mind when you answered the last question. Don't write complete sentences, just jot down whatever words or phrases that are on your mind.

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Please indicate the extent to which you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statement: “Politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can’t really understand what’s going on.”

- A. Agree strongly.
- B. Agree somewhat.
- C. Disagree somewhat.
- D. Disagree strongly.

Please indicate the extent to which you **agree** or **disagree** with the following statement: “Public officials don’t care much what people like me think.”

- A. Agree strongly.
- B. Agree somewhat.
- C. Disagree somewhat.
- D. Disagree strongly.

***Thank you very much for participating in this study and helping us learn more about the news media. Please raise your hand, and we will collect your survey and give you your \$15***

*Mock News Stories:*

### STRONG HEGEMONIC CONDITION

## **Obama Open to More Tax Cuts; Republicans Present New Economic Plan**

By Henry Miller, USA TODAY

President Obama said yesterday he may sign a bill that includes more tax cuts for businesses and high-income individuals in a Republican-backed plan aimed at jumpstarting the nation’s troubled economy.

“American corporations need capital to remain competitive in today’s high-tech economy, and to create badly needed jobs for our people,” the president said at a White House press conference called to raise attention to the issue in the wake of the recent congressional elections, in which Democrats lost control of the House of Representatives.

Sources said congressional leaders were working furiously to hammer out a bill designed to give the economy a lift amidst the stubborn downturn that has seen the country lose millions of jobs since January 2009, the month Obama took office. Republicans, who surged to power in the House on a wave of public dissatisfaction with the economy, are demanding cuts in government spending and taxes.

After the previous, Democrat-backed stimulus legislation was widely criticized as spending too much on local construction projects, aid to state governments, social service programs and other initiatives with few jobs to show for it, this new plan is very different. It is expected to include large across-the-board income tax cuts — including for those making more than \$250,000 a year — and wide-ranging tax breaks aimed at prodding corporations to purchase equipment and build facilities.

Republicans and moderate Senate Democrats say these tax cuts, which are similar to those championed by President Reagan in 1981 and by President George W. Bush in 2001 and 2003, are necessary to spur investment by those with the means to create jobs.

“Our people, and our businesses, desperately need tax relief from the crushing burdens of the federal government,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky. “We’ve had enough of the failed liberal ideas of the past, which are basically spend, spend, spend, and hope for the best.”

Obama has already said he may support a companion bill proposed by the GOP that cuts many regulations in order to make businesses more competitive. He said he would seriously consider signing an economic plan including the extra tax cuts to get people back to work. The president had previously vowed to veto any bill that helped corporations and the wealthy at the expense of the middle class.

“My commitment to ordinary folks out there remains in place, but these tax cuts will create jobs for them,” Obama said. “We can’t just spend our way out of this crisis, and I won’t let old-fashioned ideological battles keep us from acting. We need a bipartisan bill, and we need it sooner rather than later. It’s time for the new House majority to sit down and work with us.”

The plan also includes loosening eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which helps low-income workers. But liberals and progressive advocates are becoming impatient with what they see as the administration’s failure over the last two years to advance their priorities at a time

of large Democratic congressional majorities and a once-popular president whose election seemed to repudiate eight years of GOP rule.

“I hope we can keep the expanded EITC in the bill, but this economic plan is rotten,” said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-VT, a self-described socialist. “It just shows how bankrupt the Republicans’ ideas are, and how many Democrats these days are bought and paid for by corporate interests and the super-wealthy.”

Sanders cited a report by the labor union-backed Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which claims that “supply-side” tax cuts, like those in the proposed bill, do little to create jobs while contributing to economic inequality. Liberal groups are planning an email campaign, as well as street demonstrations, to pressure Obama to veto the legislation if the Senate signs on.

But many economists say doing so would send a bad signal to Wall Street, which has spearheaded a stock market revival over the last year.

“Jobs will come,” said Merrill-Lynch analyst Andrew Brooks. “We need to be patient and not let political pressures short-circuit this recovery. Washington usually does more harm than good, so the best the politicians can do is reduce the tax burden, cut spending and let the free market work its magic.”

Obama faces mounting pressure to move rightward to cater to a more conservative public mood. Republicans are pushing hard for the president to sign the tax cut bill as several Tea Party-backed candidates captured congressional seats in the recent election. Former Alaska governor Sarah Palin urged her supporters on Facebook this week to send a clear message to Democratic politicians.

“Barack Obama says he’s bipartisan. Well, it’s time for him to show it,” Palin wrote. “Say NO to big government and NO to socialism. Demand YOUR MONEY and YOUR COUNTRY back from the liberals.”

Analysts say President Obama let the Republicans gather political momentum and make gains in the recent election because the administration has had trouble sending a consistent message to voters on taxes and the economy.



“It seems like we hear one thing one day, and something completely opposite the next,” said Charlie Cook of the nonpartisan Cook Political Report. “The Democrats are floundering, and Obama’s public-approval ratings just continue to drop.”

With Republicans taking back the House of Representatives and narrowing their deficit in the Senate, Washington could be in for another prolonged period of gridlock and partisan feuding. “We in the moderate middle favor anything that works,” said columnist and blogger Andrew Sullivan. “Republicans and Democrats need to sit down, find some common ground and stop acting like spoiled children.”

Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-NV, said most voters back the president’s approach. “We want to cut taxes for ordinary people and businesses but do it in a sensible way,” said Reid, who fended off a strong challenge to his seat from Tea Party-backed candidate Sharron Angle. “We won’t bow to the extremists on either the right or the left.”

Minority Leader John Boehner, R-OH, who will likely become the new House speaker, said Obama had been waffling on the tax cut plan because his campaign supporters hate business. Boehner said he hopes the president’s recent statements signal a newfound willingness to consider conservative ideas and stop runaway spending.

“Ronald Reagan showed us the way, and if we would have stuck to it, we’d be just fine,” Boehner told reporters. “The American people demand action. Maybe, just maybe, the administration will shake off the liberal special interests and start giving our people their money back.”

#### WEAK HEGEMONIC CONDITION

## **Obama Open to More Tax Cuts; Liberals Blast New Economic Plan**

By Henry Miller, USA TODAY

President Obama said yesterday he may sign a bill that includes more tax cuts for businesses and high-income individuals in a Republican-backed plan aimed at jumpstarting the nation’s troubled economy. But liberal Democrats and progressive groups blasted the president for betraying his stated principles and dashing the hopes of countless Americans who energized his historic 2008 campaign.

“This economic plan is rotten,” said Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-VT. “It just shows how bankrupt the Republicans’ ideas are, and how many Democrats these days are bought and paid for by corporate interests and the super-wealthy.”

Sources said congressional leaders were working furiously to hammer out a bill designed to give the economy a lift amidst the stubborn downturn that has seen the country lose millions of jobs since January 2009, the month Obama took office. Republicans, who surged to power in the House on a wave of public dissatisfaction with the economy, are demanding cuts in government spending and taxes.

After the previous, Democrat-backed stimulus legislation was widely criticized as spending too much on local construction projects, aid to state governments, social service programs and other initiatives with few jobs to show for it, this new plan is very different. It is expected to include large across-the-board income tax cuts — including for those making more than \$250,000 a year — and wide-ranging tax breaks aimed at prodding corporations to purchase equipment and build facilities.

“American corporations need capital to remain competitive in today’s new high-tech economy, and to create badly needed jobs for our people,” Obama said at a White House press conference called to raise attention to the issue.

The plan also includes loosening eligibility for the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC), which helps low-income workers. But this provision, fought for by House Democrats, accounts for a minority of the total cost. More than half will go for business tax breaks and tax cuts for those making over \$150,000 a year, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

Progressive advocates are becoming impatient with what they see as the administration’s failure over the last two years to advance their priorities at a time of large Democratic congressional majorities and a once-popular president whose election seemed to repudiate eight years of GOP rule.

“The president should understand that the recent election results were caused by Democrats’ failure to act boldly enough to help average Americans,” said Maria White, a community organizer for Jobs with Justice, a grassroots advocacy group for low-wage workers. “People can only take so much suffering and exploitation before they stand up and demand their fair share.”

Sanders cited a report by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, which claims that “supply-side” tax cuts, like those in the current bill, do little to create jobs while contributing to economic inequality. Liberal groups are planning an email campaign, as well as street demonstrations, to pressure Obama to veto the legislation if the Senate signs on.

“The turn in economic policy this administration is proposing would be a travesty,” said Senator Sherrod Brown, D-OH. “Two years ago, Americans thought they were voting for fundamental change, not more enabling of the very segments who got us into this mess — irresponsible corporations and individuals at the top of the economic ladder who haven’t paid their way for the common good in decades.”

Republicans and moderate Senate Democrats say the tax cuts, which are similar to those championed by President Reagan in 1981 and by President George W. Bush in 2001 and 2003, are necessary to spur investment by those with the means to create jobs.

“Our people, and our businesses, desperately need tax relief from the crushing burdens of the federal government,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Kentucky. “We’ve had enough of the failed liberal ideas of the past, which are basically spend, spend, spend, and hope for the best.”

Obama has already said he may support a companion bill proposed by the GOP that cuts many regulations in order to make businesses more competitive. He said he would seriously consider signing an economic plan including the extra tax cuts to get people back to work. The president had previously vowed to veto any bill that helped corporations and the wealthy at the expense of the middle class.

“These tax cuts will create jobs,” Obama said. “We can’t just spend our way out of this crisis, and I won’t let old-fashioned ideological battles keep us from acting. We need a bipartisan bill, and we need it sooner rather than later.”

But progressives, many of whom were willing to give the president the benefit of the doubt in 2009 and early 2010, as he dealt with an immediate economic crisis and pressing foreign policy concerns, say Obama’s repeated attempts to compromise with Republicans and a few centrist Senate Democrats are a dead end for the country.

“The president needs to show more political courage,” said Nobel Prize-winning economist and New York Times columnist Paul Krugman. “Even with the recent election results, it is flat-out

wrong to assume that the broad middle of the American people won't accept progressive solutions to our economic problems based on fairness and social solidarity. More than half of Americans think the wealthy don't pay their fair share of taxes. And it's no wonder, because those at the top have been pampered for 30 years."

Other economists say an Obama veto would send a bad signal to Wall Street, which has spearheaded a stock market revival over the last year.

"Jobs will come," said Merrill-Lynch analyst Andrew Brooks. "We need to be patient, rather than let political pressures short-circuit this recovery. Washington usually does more harm than good, so we should let the free market work its magic."

Minority Leader John Boehner, R-OH, who will likely become the new House speaker, said Obama's statement may signal a newfound willingness to consider conservative ideas.

"Ronald Reagan showed us the way, and if we would have stuck to it, we'd be just fine," Boehner told reporters. "Maybe, just maybe, the administration will shake off the liberal special interests and start giving our people their money back."

But Nobel Prize-winning economist Joseph Stiglitz dismissed Boehner's comments as propaganda aimed at rewarding the GOP's powerful campaign backers.

"Reaganomics and corporate deregulation have proven beyond any reasonable doubt to be bankrupt ideas," Stiglitz said. "Apparently the Republican leadership hasn't gotten the news."

### CONTROL CONDITION

## **Celebrity News is Booming as American Movie Preferences Shift**

By **Henry Miller, USA TODAY**

Fueled by the boom in entertainment websites and blogs, Americans are spending more and more time following the lives of Hollywood celebrities. Trend-watchers say part of the reason might be an increase in the appeal of dramas and romance flicks with strong female characters.

According to the latest market research data, the average frequency that people report monitoring celebrity news has increased from “once every few weeks” in 2000 to “a few times a week” in 2010. And much of the increase has occurred over the last two years, researchers say.

“This decade has seen a boom for celebrity news,” said Sandra Johanson, managing director of newFrontiers.com, a private research company that tracks popular tastes in entertainment and leisure. “The availability of nearly constant updates online has really fueled the market.”

As has been the case since data started being collected, American women are about twice as likely as men to report attending to Hollywood happenings at least once a week. But even men are significantly more likely to acknowledge frequent consumption of celebrity media than they were a decade ago, said Johanson.

“It’s become increasingly acceptable, even cool, for a man to know something about the romantic adventures and misadventures, the personal victories and challenges, of celebrities, especially people in the movie business,” she said. “The generation that has come of age after the millennium no longer finds it unmanly to be able to recite — and express an opinion on — what Lindsay Lohan or Lady Gaga are up to in their free time.”

Experts say part of the reason behind the increase has been a growing preference for romance flicks and dramas with prominent female characters. Again, even men have exhibited this trend, though to a lesser extent than women, Johanson said.

“As always, men heavily favor action/adventure movies, horror and science fiction. Most of them still do love to see things blow up,” she said. “But the gender gap is closing. Romance is not just for ‘chicks’ anymore.”

Focus-group data indicates that much of the increased popularity of romance is due to growing acceptance of strong female leads played by high-profile Hollywood stars, such as Julia Roberts in *Eat Pray Love*, and that an increasing share of comedy-lovers are flocking to romantic comedies like *Going the Distance*, with Drew Barrymore and Christina Applegate.

Bill Cifer, whose consulting firm conducts research for some of the largest Hollywood production companies, sees a connection between America’s increased fascination with celebrity news and its changing taste in film.

“Most people know the difference between movies and reality, but we also unconsciously associate characters’ on-screen roles with their actual lives and personalities,” Cifer said. “When we see these really powerful female characters on-screen battling their demons and escaping loveless relationships, and these witty women navigating the perilous postmodern dating game, we want to continue to follow them when the movie’s over.”

Some experts also point to growing insecurity in an age of global terrorism and economic uncertainty, arguing that Americans are taking advantage of the burgeoning online outlets to escape the daily torrent of bad news.

The number of websites and blogs exclusively devoted to celebrity news has ballooned from a few hundred in the late 1990s to several million today, according to a recent survey by *Wired* magazine. And with so many Americans having ready access to the Internet at home or at work these days, the temptation to live vicariously is becoming more powerful.

“Most people — especially us women — consider ourselves relationship experts from the school-of-hard-knocks. Many of us have also dealt personally, or through family members and friends, with alcoholism or other addictions,” said blogger Amanda Freegee of *CelebrityRehab.com*. “We can identify with the everyday struggles that even the biggest stars go through, and we’re rooting for them to find happiness.”

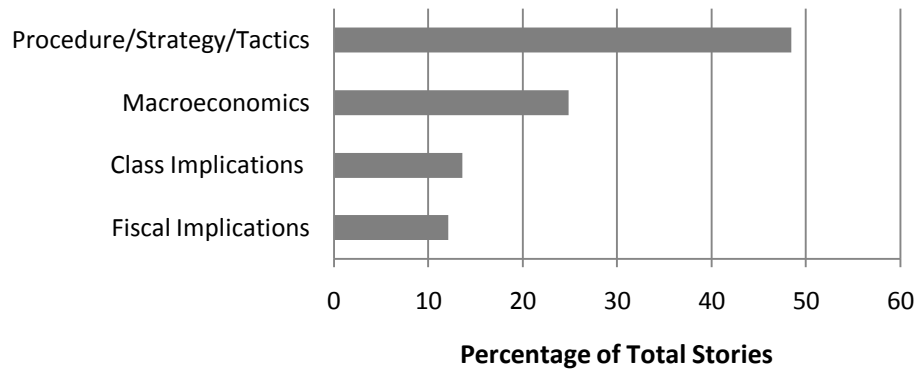
The new media landscape has fundamentally reshaped Hollywood, fueling the voracious demand for exclusive pictures and up-to-the-minute news, and possibly promoting increasingly aggressive behavior by paparazzi.

“Even 20 years ago or so, you had the usual supermarket-tabloid sheets, like *The National Enquirer* and, of course, *People* magazine. And you had *Entertainment Tonight* and a few other shows,” Cifer said. “Now, you don’t have to wait until 7 o’clock at night to find out who stumbled out of a SoHo wine bar with a companion who is not their spouse. The choices online are endless.

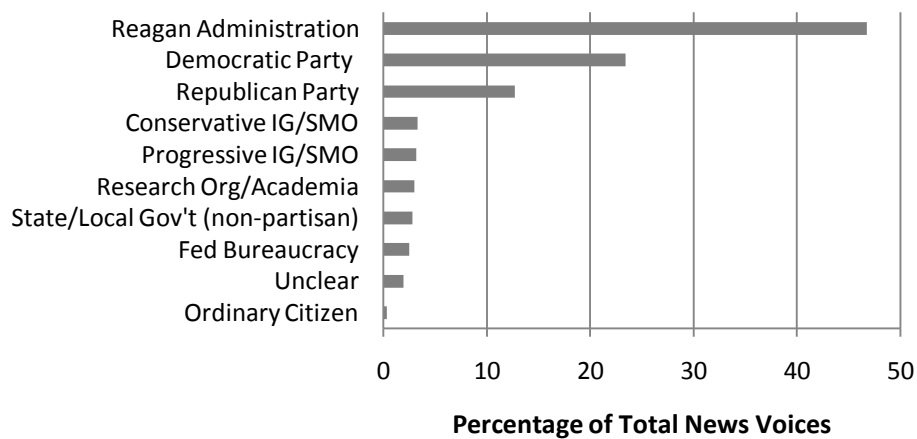
“Look, the fans want this kind of access, and to some extent the stars who depend on them to make a living have to proceed with that knowledge in mind,” he said. “But, of course, there have to be some limits to the way this news is gathered.”

## Charts and Graphs

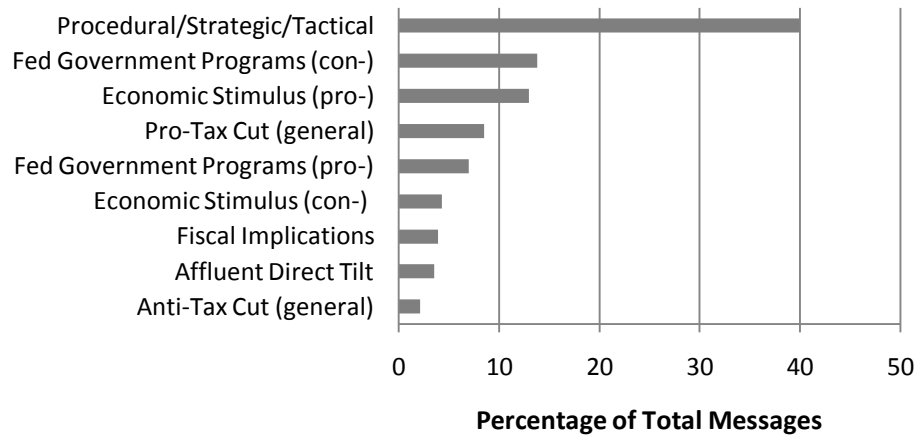
### Figure 4-1: Primary News Topics



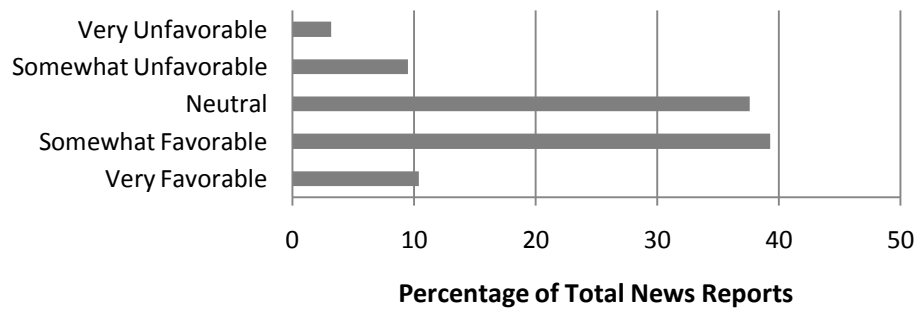
### Figure 4-2: News Sources



### Figure 4-3: Source-Frames

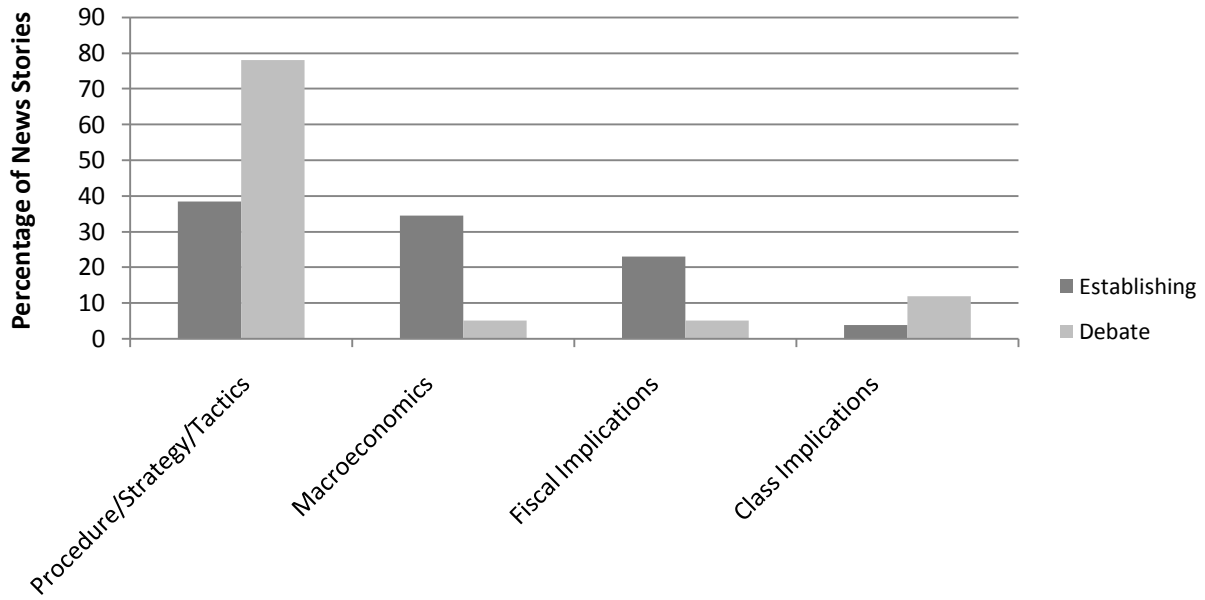


### Figure 4-4: News Favorability

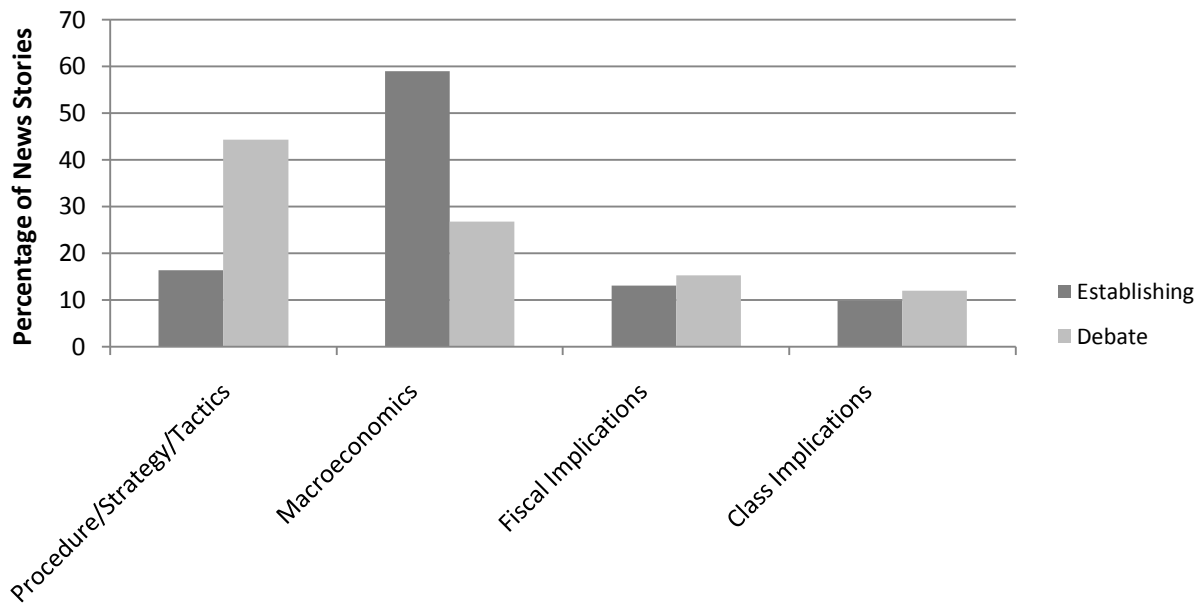




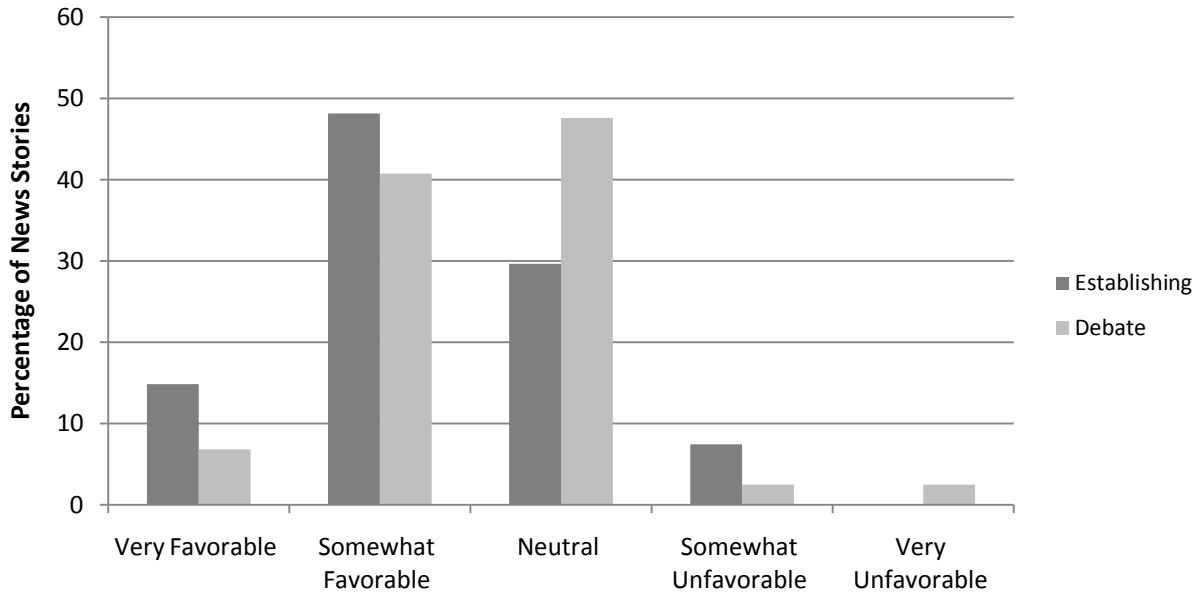
**Figure 4-5: Primary TV Topics By Phase**



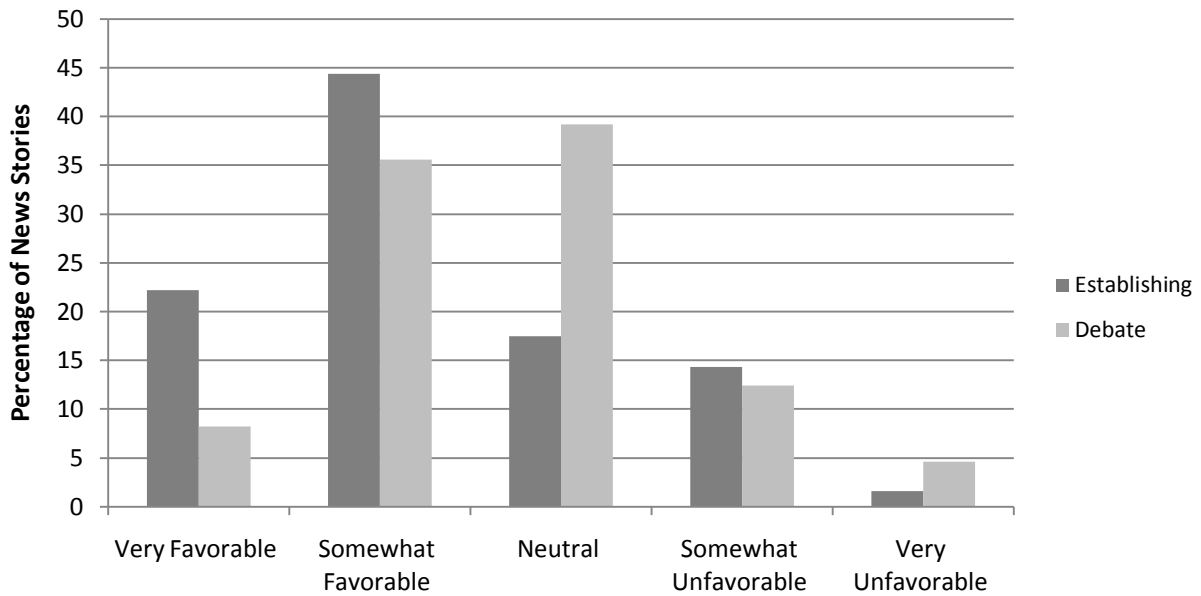
**Figure 4-6: Primary Print Topics By Phase**



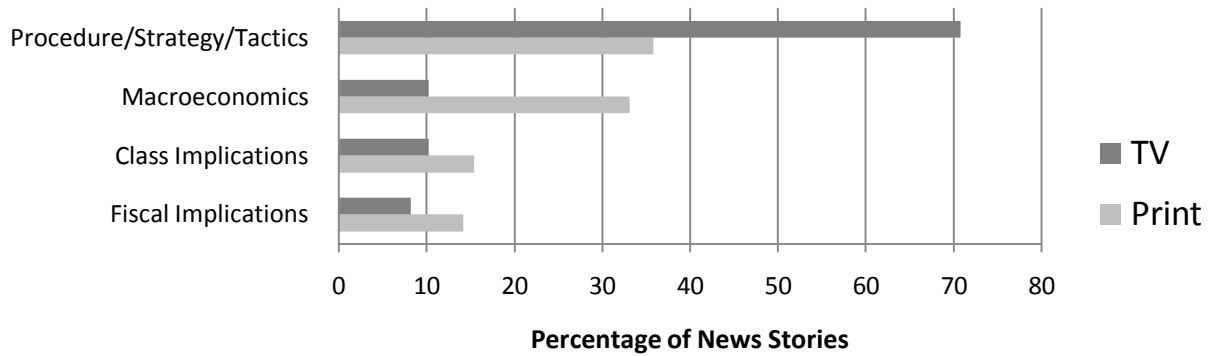
**Figure 4-7: TV News Favorability By Phase**



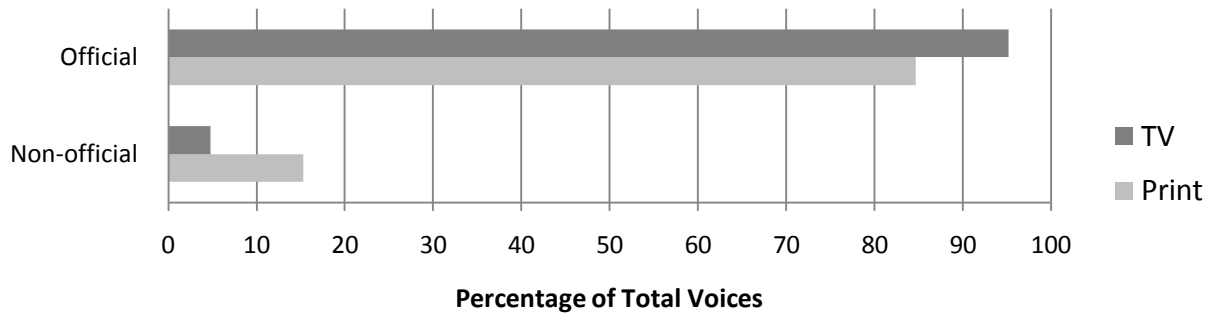
**Figure 4-8: Print News Favorability By Phase**



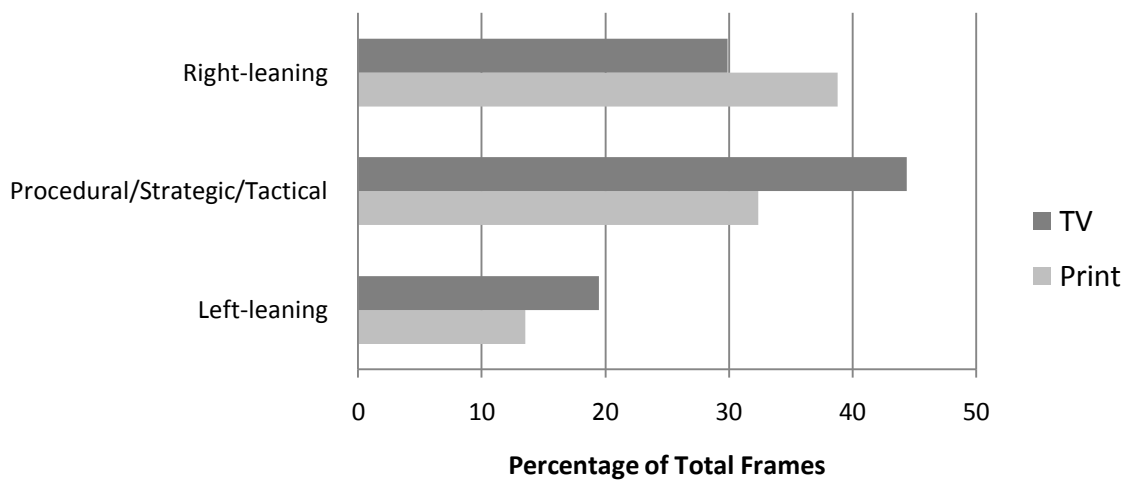
**Figure 4-9: Primary Story Topics By Format**

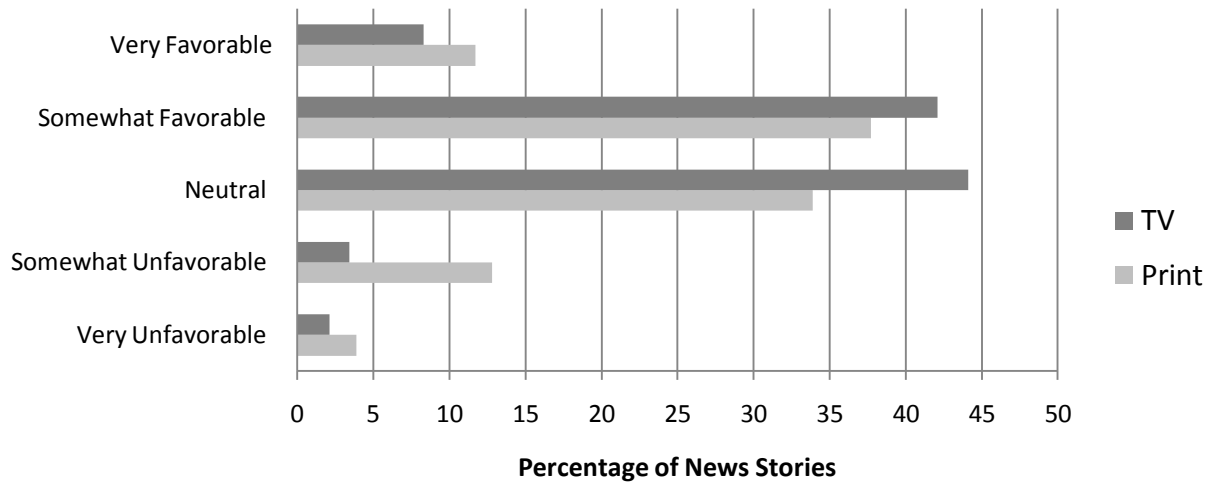


**Figure 4-10: News Source Distribution By Format**



**Figure 4-11: Source-Frames By Format**



**Figure 4-12: News Favorability By Format****Table 5-1: Key Strands of Discourse During 1981 Economic Policy Debate**

Discursive Elements	Emblematic Texts
<b>Neoliberal Right-Wing Populism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reagan speeches to joint sessions of Congress</li> <li>• Heritage Foundation policy report</li> <li>• Kemp remarks during 1979 tax policy debate</li> </ul>
<b>Procedural Populism</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AP: "A Vote For Reagan Was A Vote for Economic Program, Bush Says"</li> <li>• AP: "Bush Says Democratic Leaders Trying to Thwart People's Mandate"</li> <li>• Reagan's post-assassination attempt address to Congress</li> </ul>
<b>Media Performance and Spectacle</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AP: "A Setting Hollywood Couldn't Have Matched"</li> <li>• ABC News Coverage: Tax Bill Signing Ceremony</li> </ul>
<b>Economic Democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Harrington remarks during 1979 tax policy debate</li> </ul>

**Table 5-2: Key Signifiers in the Right-Wing Populist Discourse of Reagan Budget Address**

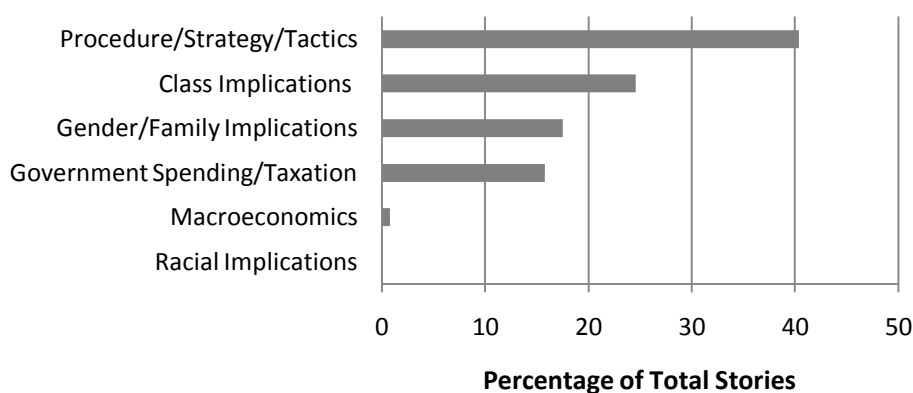
<b>Beneficial Policies</b>	<b>Obstacles and Enemies</b>
<i>Work, produce, jobs, taxpayer, marketplace, opportunity</i>	<i>Bureaucracy, social programs, welfare, subsidize, burdens, unproductive or counterproductive, government spending and taxing, unemployment, punishing inflation</i>
<i>Thrift, flexibility, cost-effectiveness, reform, legitimate or proper government</i>	<i>Ship of state is out of control, national debt, regulations, federal paperwork (or forms), waste, fraud, abuse, inefficiency, complex, incomprehensible, mismanagement</i>
<i>Strength, confidence, new, necessary</i>	<i>Force, social change, obsolete, unnecessary</i>

**Table 5-3: Key Signifiers in the Procedural-Populist Discourse Voiced by Vice President Bush and Reported by the Associated Press**

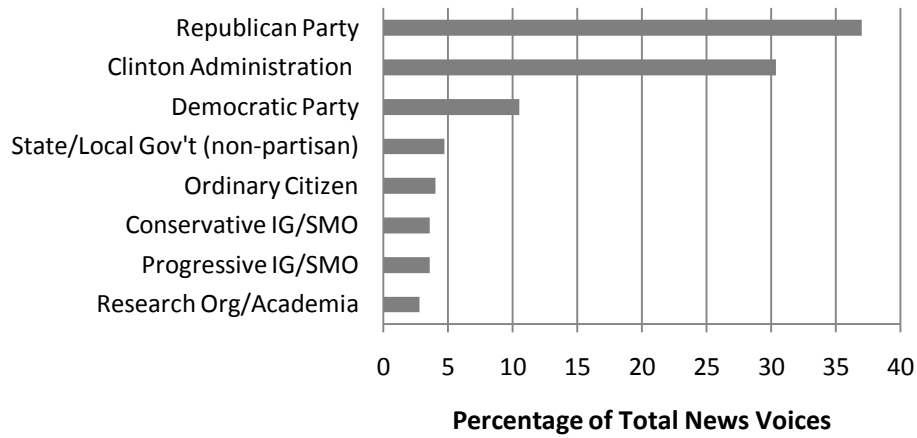
<b>Neoliberal-New Right policies</b>	<b>Embedded Liberal-Democratic Party Policies</b>
<i>The people</i>	<i>Politicians</i>
<i>Mandate, public opinion, free election</i>	<i>A limited number of men in a closed room</i>
<i>("Middle America")</i>	<i>Washington</i>
<i>The thinking of the American people, the new spirit of America</i>	<i>The established opposition leadership in Washington, echoes of past policies of tax and spend, of bureaucratic waste and excess</i>

**Table 5-4: Alternative Significations in 1979 Policy Debate Between Kemp and Harrington**

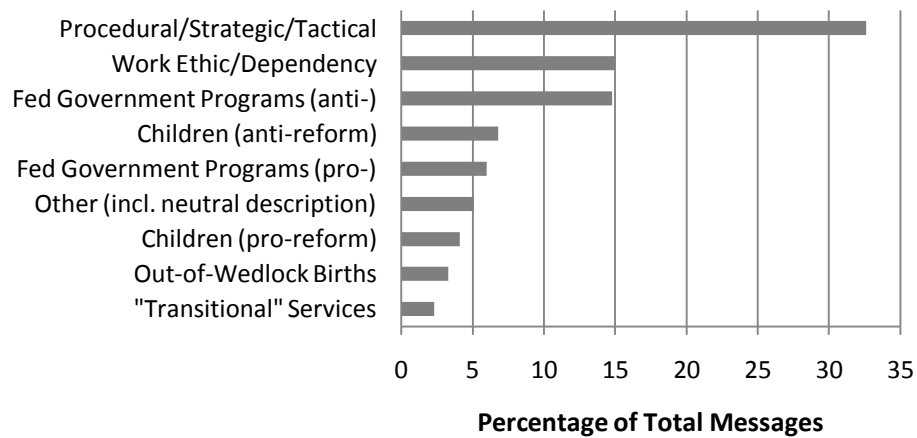
	<b>Neoliberal-New Right</b>	<b>Democratic-Socialist</b>
<b>Investment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Private Profit</li> <li>•Self-Interested Initiative</li> <li>•Market Allocation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Social Need</li> <li>•Solidarity &amp; Planning</li> <li>•Common Purpose as Democratically Determined</li> </ul>
<b>The State</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Economic Oppression of Market Actors</li> <li>•Social Program Waste, Fraud &amp; Abuse</li> <li>•Pathological Dependency of Underclass</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Private Corporate Power</li> <li>•Military Program Waste, Fraud &amp; Abuse</li> <li>•Subsidization of Privilege</li> </ul>
<b>Democracy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Market Mechanisms</li> <li>•Consumer, Worker &amp; Investor Choice</li> <li>•Encouragement of Wealth Creation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Participatory Collective Politics</li> <li>•Worker Control of Enterprises</li> <li>•Egalitarian Distribution of Material Outputs</li> </ul>
<b>Productivity</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Private Market Rewards</li> <li>•Working More</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Social and Environmental Health</li> <li>•Working Less</li> </ul>
<b>Tax Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Capital Investment Incentives</li> <li>•Upper Bracket-Oriented Income Tax Cuts</li> <li>•Encourage Market Work &amp; Wealth Creation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Large Tax Cuts for Low- &amp; Middle-Income Workers</li> <li>•Large Tax Increases for the Wealthy &amp; Corporations, including Heavy Estate Taxation</li> <li>•Proceeds for Social Programs, Business Regulation, Public Enterprise Investment</li> </ul>

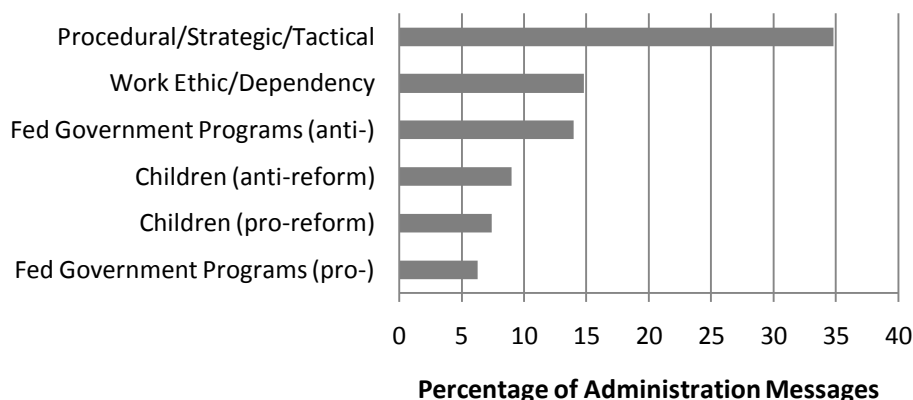
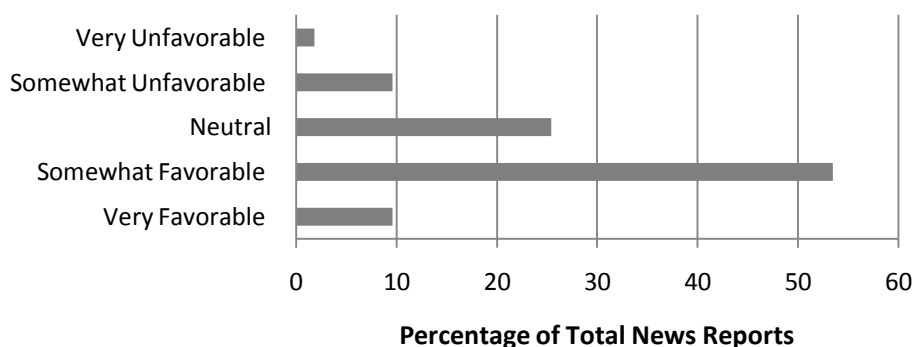
**Figure 6-1: Primary News Topics**

**Figure 6-2: News Sources**



**Figure 6-3: Source-Frames**



**Figure 6-4: Clinton Administration Frames****Figure 6-5: News Favorability****Table 6-1: Public Opinion Results on Welfare, 1994-1996**

	AGREE	DISAGREE
Mandate work for recipients.	92	6
Two-year limit.	88	9
Poor are too dependent on government.	85	13
Most recipients are dependent forever.	82	11
Public assistance discourages work.	77	20
Jobs are available for most who want to work.	72	24
Public assistance system is not working well.	72	25
Welfare does more harm than good (encourages family breakup, damages work ethic).	69	23
Government spends too much on welfare.	66	27
Shift control over welfare to states.	63	30
People not doing enough to help themselves is the main cause of poverty.	60	30
Families generally get more welfare benefits than they need.	58	21
Government should not do more to help needy.	56	41
Most could get along without welfare if they tried.	48	35

(Note: Cell entries represent percentages of survey respondents.)



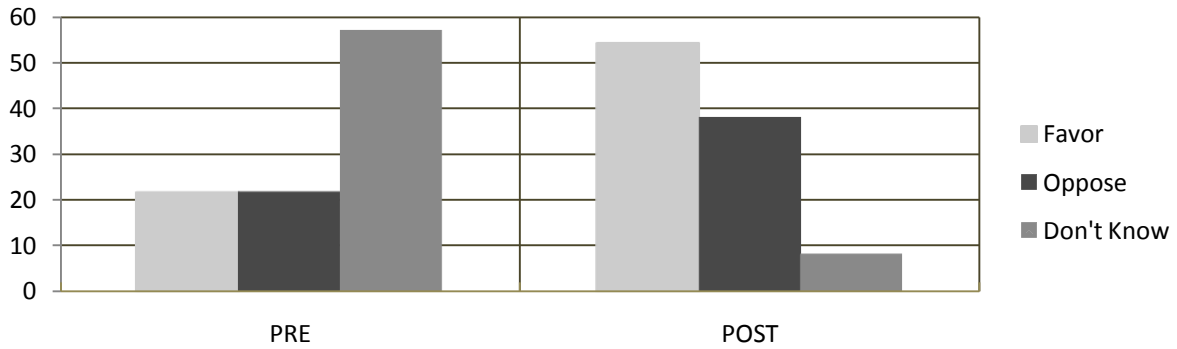
**Table 7-1: Organization of Hegemonic Welfare Discourse**

Themes	Emblematic Signs	Omitted Terms	Ideological Effects
State-Market Dichotomy	“Welfare-to-work”	Short-term aid, family care, informal/part-time work	Discipline labor, support business power
Racialized & Gendered Personalization of Poverty	“Illegitimacy,” “Addiction”	Racism, gender bias, moral authoritarianism	Reinforce popular divisions, legitimate social control
Apparent Mass Consensus	Reified polls, “success stories”	Preference endogeneity, popular movements	Marshal mass sentiment for neoliberalism
Apparent Official Conflict	“Welfare warfare,” “cat fight,” “high-level welfare summit”	Neoliberal policy assumptions	Legitimate elitist governance, obscure neoliberal consensus

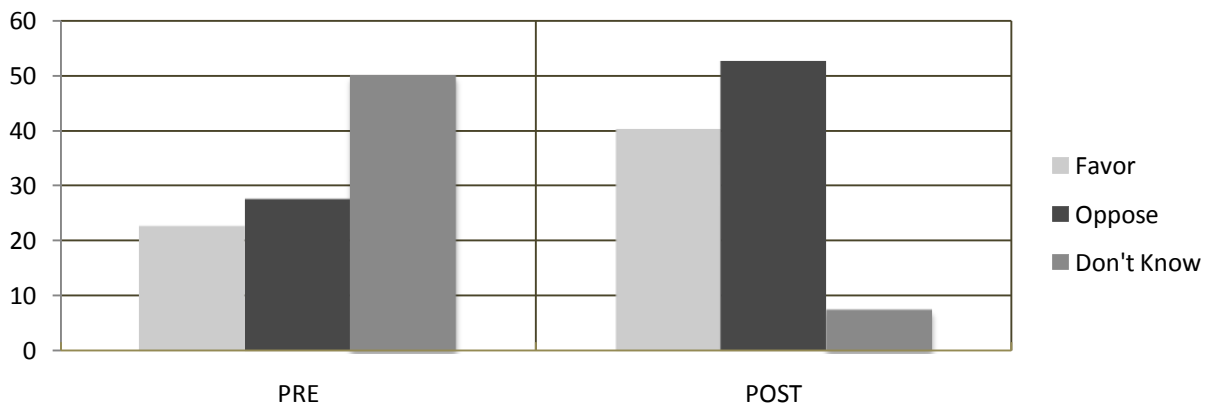
**Table 8-1: Experimental Conditions**

	Framing	Sourcing	Policy Substance
(A) <b>Strong Hegemonic</b>	Frames favoring policy proposal outpace dissenting messages by <b>three-to-one</b>	Official sources dominate by <b>four-to-one</b> (no left-leaning non-government voices)	<b>Seven paragraphs</b> of procedural, strategic and tactical content ( <i>one-third</i> of length)
(B) <b>Weak Hegemonic</b>	Frames favoring and opposing proposal about <b>equal</b> in frequency	Official voices outpace others by <b>three-to-two</b> (includes <b>three</b> left-leaning non-government sources)	<b>Two sentences</b> on policy’s relative benefits for income groups and corporations
(C) <b>Control</b>	Article on rising celebrity news interest and shifting movie tastes		

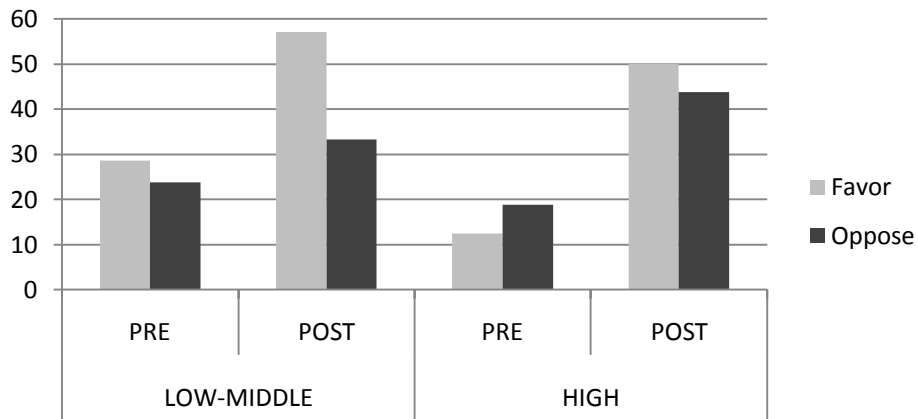
**FIGURE 8-1**  
**Aggregate Policy Opinion: Strong Hegemonic Condition**



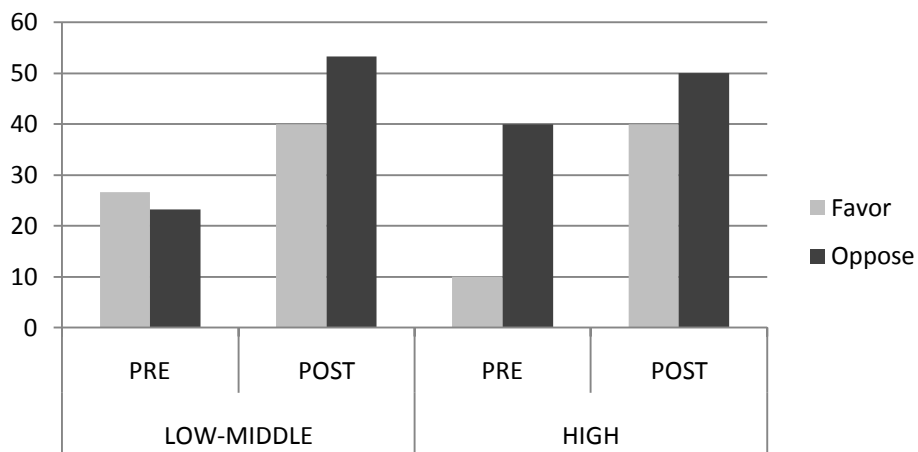
**FIGURE 8-2**  
**Aggregate Policy Opinion: Weak Hegemonic Condition**



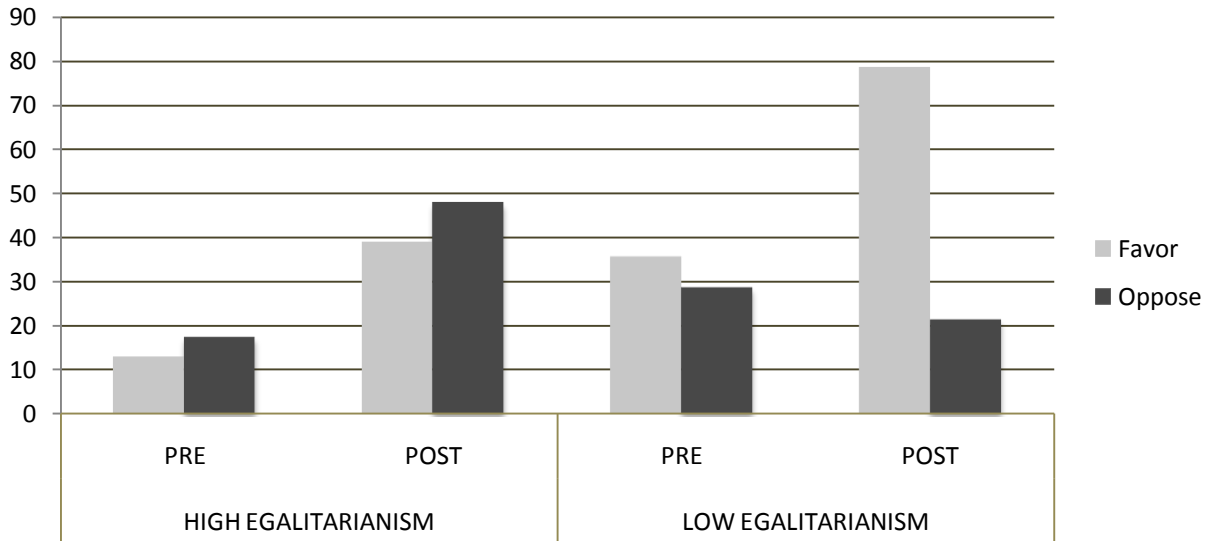
**FIGURE 8-3**  
**Strong Hegemonic Condition: Policy Opinion by Income Level**



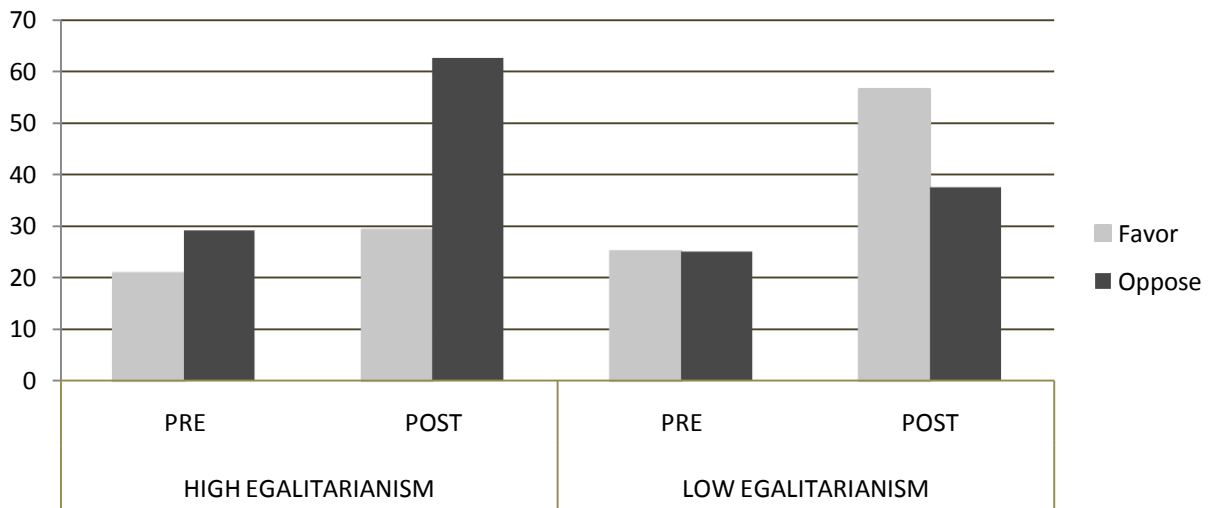
**FIGURE 8-4**  
**Weak Hegemonic Condition: Policy Opinion by Income Level**



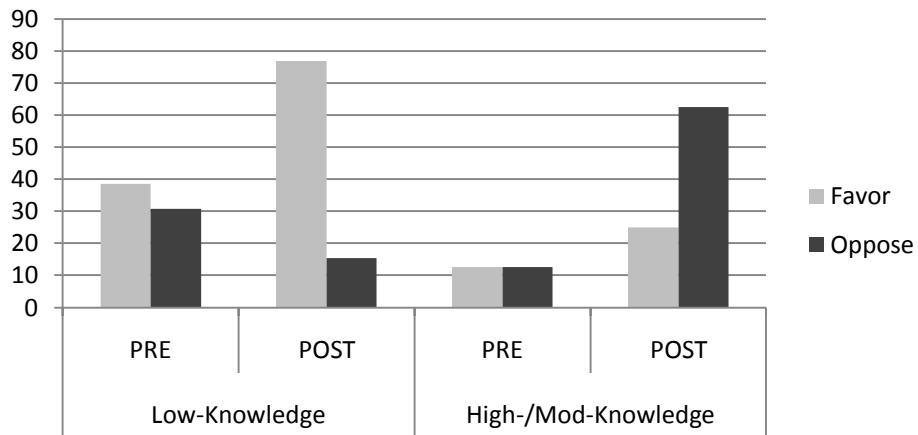
**FIGURE 8-5**  
**Strong Hegemonic Condition:**  
**Policy Opinion By Level of Egalitarianism**



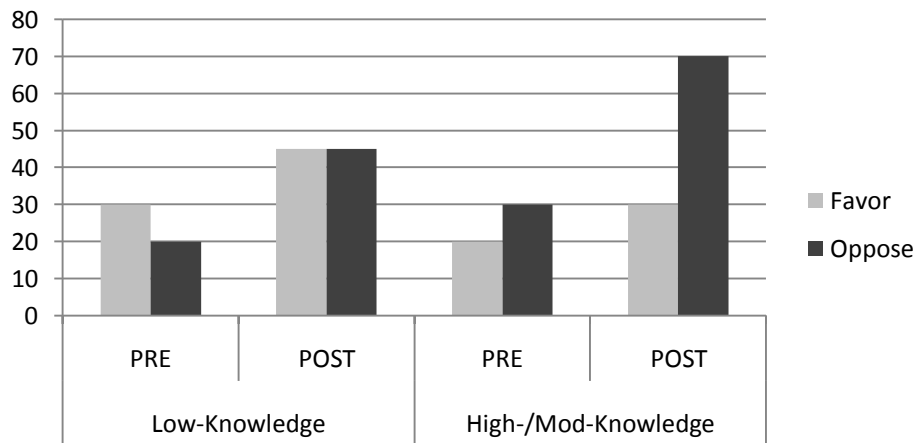
**FIGURE 8-6**  
**Weak Hegemonic Condition:**  
**Policy Opinion By Level of Egalitarianism**



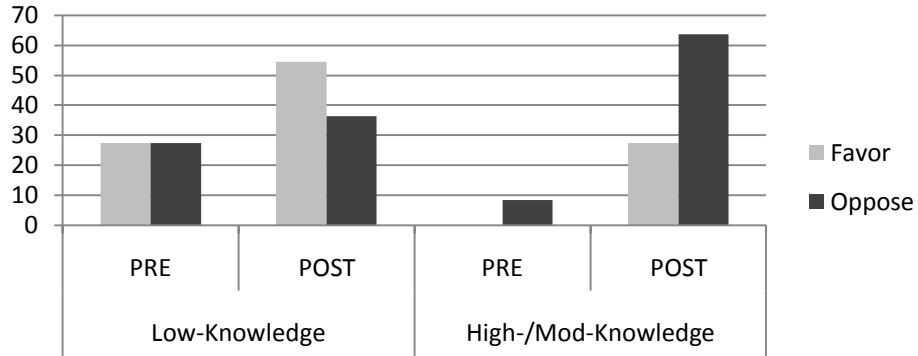
**FIGURE 8-7**  
**Policy Opinion in Strong Hegemonic Condition:**  
**Low- & Middle-Income Participants**



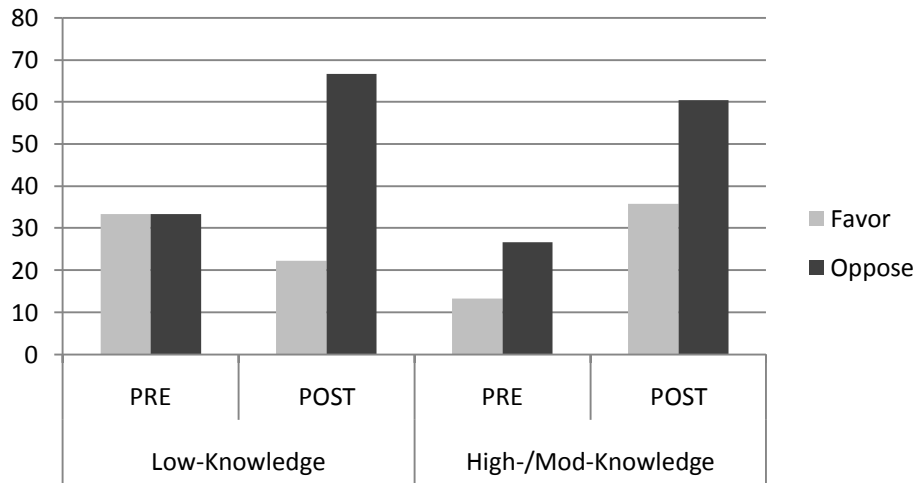
**FIGURE 8-8**  
**Policy Opinion in Weak Hegemonic Condition:**  
**Low- & Middle-Income Participants**



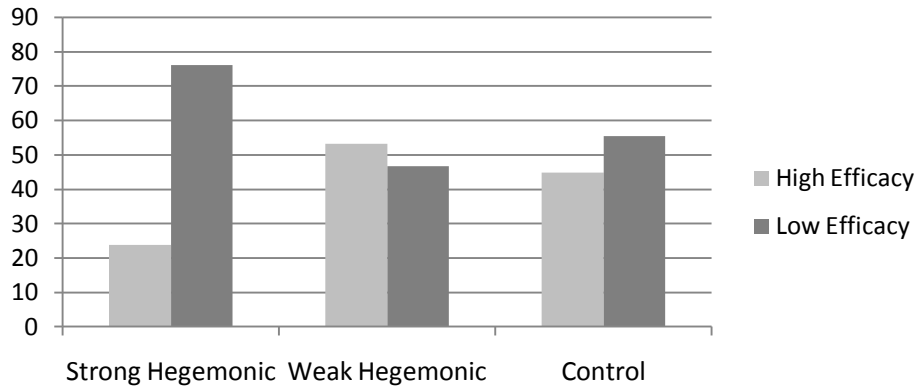
**FIGURE 8-9**  
**Policy Opinion in Strong Hegemonic Condition:**  
**Highly-Egalitarian Participants**



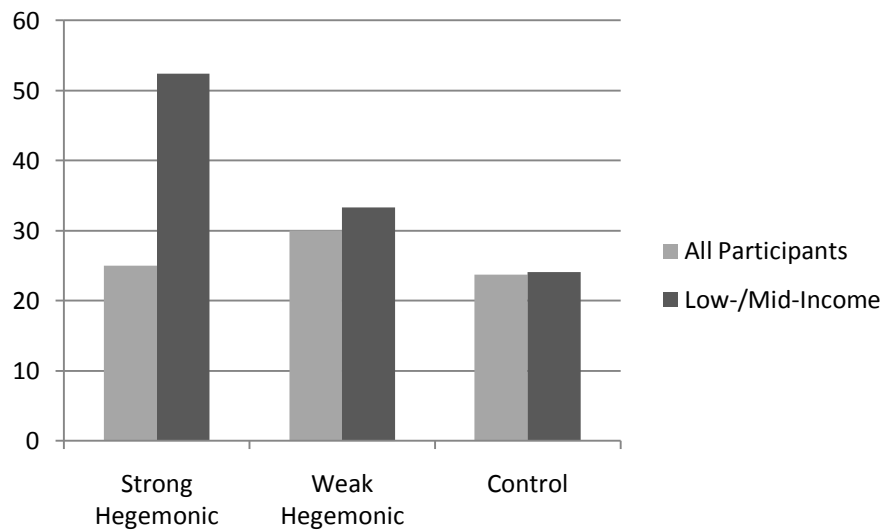
**FIGURE 8-10**  
**Policy Opinion in Weak Hegemonic Condition:**  
**Highly Egalitarian Participants**



**FIGURE 8-11**  
**Internal Political Efficacy After News Reception:**  
**Low- & Middle-Income Participants**



**FIGURE 8-12**  
**External Political Efficacy After News Reception:**  
**Proportion Reporting Very Low Levels**



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