



Who Governs?: Presidents, Public Opinion, and Manipulation (Chicago Studies in American Politics)

By James N. Druckman, Lawrence R. Jacobs

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America's model of representational government rests on the premise that elected officials respond to the opinions of citizens. This is a myth, however, not a reality, according to James N. Druckman and Lawrence R. Jacobs. In *Who Governs?*, Druckman and Jacobs combine existing research with novel data from US presidential archives to show that presidents make policy by largely ignoring the views of most citizens in favor of affluent and well-connected political insiders. Presidents treat the public as pliable, priming it to focus on personality traits and often ignoring it on policies that fail to become salient.

Melding big debates about democratic theory with existing research on American politics and innovative use of the archives of three modern presidents—Johnson, Nixon, and Reagan—Druckman and Jacobs deploy lively and insightful analysis to show that the conventional model of representative democracy bears little resemblance to the actual practice of American politics. The authors conclude by arguing that polyarchy and the promotion of accelerated citizen mobilization and elite competition can improve democratic responsiveness. An incisive study of American politics and the flaws of representative government, this book will be warmly welcomed by readers interested in US politics, public opinion, democratic theory, and the fecklessness of American leadership and decision-making.

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Editorial Review

Review

“*Who Governs?* is a very significant contribution to our understanding of how presidents do not simply respond to public opinion but participate in crafting it. A breakthrough.”

(Lisa Disch, University of Michigan)

“This fascinating study, based on confidential documents from three US presidents, sheds new light on the relationship between America’s political elites and its citizens. The picture is not pretty: presidents of both political parties seek to manipulate, distract, and often mislead the public in their pursuit of narrow interests that do not benefit the majority of citizens. A compelling, important, and sobering account that underscores just how far America has drifted from the democratic ideal of a government of, by, and for the people.”

(Martin Gilens, Princeton University)

“Just how responsive is the president to the public? In theory, we all hope very, but increasingly we worry that presidents have grown more distant from the wishes of the public. In *Who Governs?*, we get an empirical answer to that question that is at once novel and also deeply disturbing.”

(Heath Brown, *New Books in Political Science* 2015-05-22)

“*Who Governs?* is an exploration of presidents, public opinion, and manipulation. Druckman and Jacobs make the case that presidents from both Republican and Democratic parties mainly serve and are guided by the wishes of the wealthy and political elites and exploit public opinion in order to serve those ends.”

(*Talking Points Memo* 2015-06-03)

“Druckman and Jacobs’s *Who Governs?* is notable in that it offers a rich and complex view on the process of representation in democratic society, one that takes seriously the notion of elite influence over public opinion and that provides compelling evidence that unequal representation exists because of the conscious, strategic actions of political elites. This represents a significant step forward in understanding both why representational biases continue to exist in American politics, and how we might remedy them.”

(*Public Opinion Quarterly* 2016-04-25)

“An impressive, thought-provoking work. . . . Druckman and Jacobs skillfully examine how modern presidents have made use of yet another technological advance: sophisticated public opinion polling. . . . The lasting contribution of this book is that it wipes away any romanticized or theoretical notions about how the presidency functions in the American political system. Presidents (at least, the ones considered in the book, but is there any doubt that later ones are doing the same thing with even greater intensity?) are out to get their way. And they now have a tool—polling—that gives them insights into what works and what doesn’t.”

(*Congress and the Presidency* 2016-04-25)

“Druckman and Jacobs ask a question that speaks to the fundamental nature of American democracy: How responsive is the government to public opinion? . . . The authors convincingly show that rather than responding to the wishes of ordinary Americans, presidents routinely seek to distract large swaths of voters from important issues, and perhaps even more disturbingly, disingenuously convince them that what is good for the most affluent and well-connected Americans is also good for them. This persuasive book presents a sobering view of a broken political system that serves the interests of only the narrowest slice of Americans.

... Highly recommended."

(Choice 2016-04-25)

About the Author

James N. Druckman is the Payson S. Wild Professor of Political Science and Faculty Fellow at the Institute for Policy Research at Northwestern University and an honorary professor of political science at Aarhus University in Denmark. **Lawrence R. Jacobs** is the Walter F. and Joan Mondale Chair for Political Studies at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs and the Department of Political Science at the University of Minnesota.

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