
Chapter Three

All Men Are Liars: Is Democracy Meaningless?

1. Introduction

One current of thought within the rational choice approach to the study of politics asserts that democratic voting and democratic discussion are each, generally, inaccurate and meaningless.¹ I will call an emphasis on these descriptive assertions against democracy “the Rochester current,” because its exemplar, the late William Riker, was long a professor of political science at the University of Rochester, and his work on social choice and democracy influenced many of his students and colleagues there.² The Rochester current is heir to a tradition of skepticism about the possibility of democratic politics, most respectably expressed earlier in this century by the economists Pareto and Schumpeter.

In the United States the skeptical view of democracy is often accompanied by a family of arguments to the effect that “most public sector programs . . . are inappropriate, or are carried on at an inappropriate level, or are executed in an inappropriate manner.”³ The normative recommendation that is supposed to follow from these descriptive assertions is that we are best protected from the absurdities of democracy by liberal institutions that, to the maximum extent feasible, shunt decisions from the incoherent democratic forum to the coherent economic market and that fragment

The title of this essay is taken from the verse “I said in my haste, All men are liars,” 116th Psalm, Prayer Book, in Blunt ([1662]1866: 483). Adam Przeworski demanded that credibility be explained, not assumed; this essay is a response. I thank the participants in the Workshop on Deliberative Democracy, University of Chicago, April 28–30, 1995. I also thank Jon Elster, Diego Gambetta, Desmond King, Stuart Romm, and Steven Warner for specific criticisms; as always, I am responsible for the contents.

political power so that ambitious elites circulate and contest in perpetual futility – in other words, that the U.S. Constitution, especially as it was interpreted before the New Deal to prevent political interference in the economy, is one of the best of all possible political arrangements.⁴ The descriptive assertions against democracy and that normative recommendation are not necessarily linked, however. There are those who grant some credence to the descriptive assertions, yet would presumably recommend institutions more social democratic than conservative in content.⁵ Others could plausibly argue that if voting and discussion are inaccurate and meaningless, then coercive paternalism is necessarily better than any liberalism for coherently shaping and satisfying people's needs.⁶

In his *Liberalism against Populism*, an interpretation of the results of social choice theory, Riker makes an apparently powerful case against the very intelligibility of majoritarian democracy.⁷ Because different voting systems yield different outcomes from the same profile of individual voters' preferences, he argues, democracy is *inaccurate*. For a simple example, consider that if a group of people were voting for one among three or more candidates for an office, then a voting system that on one ballot selected the candidate with a plurality (the most votes, but not necessarily a majority) might select a different candidate than a system that held a second ballot for a majority runoff between the two top vote getters from a first ballot. Different methods of aggregating individuals' fixed choices may yield different group choices.

Next, Riker continues, given a fixed voting system, then democracy is *meaningless*: the outcome of voting is manipulable, and it is not possible to distinguish manipulated from unmanipulated outcomes because of the unknowability of private intentions underlying public actions. The spirit of the argument is best conveyed by presenting Condorcet's paradox of voting. Suppose that there are three persons, named 1, 2, and 3, deciding by majority vote among three alternatives, *a*, *b*, and *c*, and that individual preference orders are as shown in Table 3.1. As most political scientists know, with that particular profile of individuals' preferences, alternative *a* has a majority of votes against *b*, *b* a majority against *c*, and *c* a majority against *a*, so that no alternative beats all others, and "collective preference" cycles meaninglessly from one alternative to the next. The Condorcet paradox of voting is a special case of the Arrow possibility theorem; the Arrow theorem shows more generally that, assuming all logically possible individual orderings over alternative

Table 3.1. Cycling Preference Profile

Voters	Preferences (Left > Right)		
1	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>
2	<i>c</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>
3	<i>b</i>	<i>c</i>	<i>a</i>

social states, no method of aggregating individuals' transitive preference orderings guarantees a collective preference ordering that is transitive. Therefore, even the same method of aggregating individuals' fixed choices may yield different group choices, permitting undetected manipulation of outcomes. I will return to Riker's arguments in Section 2.

As Arrow's possibility theorem and similar results of social choice theory came to be more broadly known and understood, political thinkers began to ask why these results were so at odds with our commonsense notions of democratic life. Riker declared that "[v]oting . . . is the central act of democracy,"⁸ and that is a clue as to what might have gone amiss. Democracy involves both voting and discussion, and discussion is obviously at least as important to democracy, descriptively and normatively, as voting. Also, the more individuals' preference orders are similar to one another's, the less likely is cycling of aggregate outcomes and the related problems of democratic voting; and discussion does seem to be the only means at hand to reduce differences between people, bringing them closer together on issues or getting them to agree on a single dimension of consideration (although there is no guarantee that discussion will succeed in reducing differences on any particular issue). Because processes of discussion and associated individual and collective deliberation and attitude change are not captured well by social choice theory, perhaps some thinkers were tempted to dismiss these processes as inessential as well.

Around the same time as Riker's vivid salvo against democracy, the German social theorist Habermas propounded his theory of communicative action.⁹ Habermas distinguishes two mechanisms for coordinating social actions: in strategic interaction, one person seeks to influence another by means of threatened punishment or

promised reward (the typical representation in economic models); in communicative interaction, one person seeks to convince another by means of rational argument. This distinction is worthy of attention, since the difference is quite striking between saying something because one believes it to be true or right and saying something merely because someone else is making one say it. Habermas's work seems to be as murky in its substance as it is in its style,¹⁰ but his emphasis on rational agreement as a theoretically neglected basis of social action inspired more precise thinkers to pursue the issue in democratic theory. Elster argued that social choice theory fails to capture the distinction between the isolated and private expression of preferences on the market and the open and public activity of politics in the democratic forum.¹¹ Manin proposed deliberation in place of idealized unanimity (as found in Habermas and, incidentally, in some economic models as the Pareto frontier) as the basis of democratic legitimacy; public preferences over public ends are not merely reported but formed in the process of public deliberation.¹² For Cohen, building on Rawls, properly conducted "democratic politics involves *public deliberation on the common good*, requires some form of *manifest equality* among citizens, and *shapes the identity and interests* of citizens."¹³ The work in the Rochester current came to be known as the aggregative conception of democracy, as contrasted to an emerging deliberative conception of democracy. The deliberative conception presumes that it is possible for properly designed democratic institutions to provide for generally accurate and meaningful discussion of public issues.

Austen-Smith and Riker constructed a game-theoretic model of legislative committee discussion and decision intended to show that in equilibrium at least some legislators have incentives to conceal private information so that the final committee decision can be "incoherent" by failing to reflect fully the preferences of all committee members. The details of the model as it evolved can be found in the source documents.¹⁴ What I want to emphasize here is Austen-Smith and Riker's *interpretation* of the results. Because of the authors' "pessimism about the rationality of social life," they apologize for demonstrating the "obvious" main result on incoherence. They go on to say:

Admittedly these results come from a sparse model. However. . . .
[o]ur model . . . is biased toward full revelation [of information]. As

such, the results have substantive implications both descriptively and normatively . . . generally, our result calls into question some extreme claims of liberalism, for instance that truth triumphs in the marketplace of ideas. . . . [I]t is reasonable to inquire whether our main result – that coherence cannot be guaranteed – carries over into more complicated models and even into the real world. We conjecture that our result holds up.¹⁵

Thus, it seems that political science proves that democratic discussion is inaccurate and meaningless.

Austen-Smith refined a costless signaling model of legislative debate, and concluded that there is “little opportunity for credible transmission of information in debate” and that the conclusion “can be expected to hold in more general environments of which the present model is a particular case.”¹⁶ In unpublished notes, Austen-Smith seems to endorse the skeptical view of democracy. With respect to the minimal conception of deliberation as an informational activity, he asks whether public discussion would

insure that all individuals share common beliefs about the consequences of any collective decision. . . . There is a sizable and growing game-theoretic literature on signaling, especially costless signaling (natural language), that suggest the answer is in general No. There are essentially two reasons for this when communication is with natural language.¹⁷

First, unless individuals have sufficiently similar interests, no credible communication occurs, according to Austen-Smith. Second, variations in the mere sequence in which people speak in deliberation may change what private information is revealed for public consideration (reminiscent of Riker’s argument for the inaccuracy of voting).

In Section 2, I identify Riker’s basic pattern of argument against the intelligibility of democratic *voting* and show why it is wrong. In Section 3, I summarize the costless signaling models of political talk that are interpreted so as to conclude that democratic *discussion* is inaccurate and meaningless; I show that such an interpretation would just be a repetition of Riker’s mistaken pattern of argument against democratic voting, and show also that more realistic rational choice models of the democratic forum support the intuition that public discussion is *generally* credible. In Section 4, I explain that credibility is largely a matter of costly consistency, that decep-

tion is coercive and likely to be interpreted as malevolence, and that democracy is the best way to subdue deception.

2. Is Democratic Voting Meaningless?

Riker acknowledges that there are similarities in judgment among individuals, and thus that uncontrived cyclical outcomes are quite rare. His objection is rather that cycles can be contrived, and thus outcomes can be manipulated. He interprets various formal results to show that every democratic method of voting can be manipulated, by means of strategic voting, by agenda control, or by introducing new issues or dimensions to the decision. In strategic voting a person votes against her true taste in order to bring about a more desirable outcome. For example, in a plurality runoff system, one might vote against one's first choice and for one's second choice in the primary election as the best candidate to defeat one's third and least-favored choice in the general election. "*Since we can never be certain what 'true tastes' are – all we ever know are revealed tastes – we can never be certain when voting is strategic.*"¹⁸ Strategic voters manipulate the outcome, their manipulation can not be certainly detected, strategic voting is possibly, even probably, commonplace; thus,

*all voting is rendered uninterpretable and meaningless. Manipulated outcomes are meaningless because they are manipulated, and unmanipulated outcomes are meaningless because they cannot be distinguished from manipulated ones.*¹⁹

If one person is able to decide the content and order of propositions to be voted on, his control of the agenda may allow him to influence or determine the outcome of voting; it can be shown, in the abstract, that simple majority voting can lead to any outcome in a space of issues if the agenda of voting is appropriately manipulated. Since we know from observation that much political dispute concerns agenda control, we may infer that manipulation by agenda control is commonplace, according to Riker. And "we never know precisely when and how such manipulation occurs or succeeds . . . this manipulation is frequent but unidentified . . . *all* outcomes of voting are rendered meaningless and uninterpretable."²⁰ Another method for manipulating outcomes is the introduction of new issues or dimensions. For example, from 1800 to 1860 a majority agrarian faction dominated a minority commercial faction in American politics,

and, Riker claims, by 1860 the commercial faction had found through trial and error an arbitrary third issue, slavery, that divided the agrarian faction and thus created a new commercial – antislavery majority faction, which consolidated its dominance in civil war. “Again the meaning of outcomes is hard to interpret.”²¹

I examine Riker’s *Liberalism against Populism* at length in another document.²² There I am able to show, first, that his conjecture, that democratic voting is inaccurate because different voting systems give different outcomes from the same profile of preferences, fails, if, as is the case, there is a slight similarity of preference orders among voters. Second, I claim that majority cycling, or the Condorcet paradox, has no empirical relevance because it is *most* improbable with a *slight* similarity of preferences; moreover, with respect to distributional contests, if individuals’ preference orders over public states of affairs are mostly impartial, then the profile of individuals’ preferences that produce a cycle will most likely not occur; and if preferences are mostly partial, then any impartial preference orders will most likely prevail over the partial preference orders. Third, I maintain that strategic voting and agenda control are not empirically relevant and that manipulation of issues and dimensions is rationally constrained by consistency requirements.²³ It is not appropriate to repeat here the arguments that support those conclusions; but it is relevant to examine here Riker’s basic pattern of argument about voting, and to show why it is mistaken, because a similarly mistaken pattern of argument is central to the skeptical interpretations of democratic discussion that I criticize at length in Section 3.

The basic pattern of the argument goes like this:

1. Revealed tastes, actual choices such as votes, are directly observed, but true tastes, the underlying preferences, must be indirectly inferred.
2. Undetected manipulation is possible in any one instance of voting (and probably frequent, although frequency does not bear on the argument).
3. Therefore, in all instances taken together, underlying preferences cannot be inferred from votes.

The next step is that if underlying preferences cannot be known, then any claim to aggregate the preferences of different individuals is meaningless. Notice that by substituting “communication” for references to voting, the amended argument would prove the

“meaninglessness” of all communication, including political discussion. Statement 2 I grant as true (however, if true preferences cannot be inferred, then it is awkward for Riker to make any claim about the frequency of manipulation in voting). Statement 1 is confused in the context of this argument, but to go into that here would take us too far astray.²⁴ Granting the first statement, the conclusion still does not follow.

If all we know are public votes over alternatives, without discussion, in a single, static instance, then what do we know about the underlying preferences behind the actual choices? Strictly speaking, we do not even know what kind of entities emit the vote; all we know are some bare rankings, an aggregation rule, and an outcome. With so little information, we could not say that choices might strategically misrepresent preferences. The best we could say is either that choices *are* preferences or that “underlying preference” is a meaningless concept. We could not discover that choices may strategically misrepresent preferences unless we had information from beyond the single instance. It is obvious to us that choices may misrepresent preferences because we do not live in the single instance. In the richer information environment, we know that choices sometimes misrepresent preferences only because we know that choices sometimes do represent preferences.

Much of one’s knowledge, and almost all of one’s discursive knowledge, political or not, depends on the testimony of others.²⁵ Could that testimony be “generally” wrong? The skeptic denies the possibility of knowing an outside world, or denies the possibility of knowing other minds, on the argument that since *each* of our beliefs (about an outside world or about other minds) taken alone may be false, they might *all* be false. The philosopher Donald Davidson replies that it does not follow from the fact that any one of the bills in my pocket may have the highest serial number that all the bills in my pocket have the highest serial number, nor that since anyone may be elected president, everyone may be elected president. Nor could it happen that all our beliefs might be false.²⁶ “[E]nough in the framework and the fabric of our beliefs must be true to give content to the rest.”²⁷

There is no assigning beliefs to a person one by one on the basis of his verbal behavior, his choices, or other local signs no matter how plain and evident, for we make sense of particular beliefs only as they cohere with other beliefs, with preferences, with intentions,

hopes, fears, expectations, and the rest. . . . Crediting people with a large degree of consistency cannot be counted mere charity: it is unavoidable if we are to be in a position to accuse them meaningfully of error and some degree of irrationality. Global confusion, like universal mistake, is unthinkable, not because imagination boggles, but because too much confusion leaves nothing to be confused about and massive error erodes the background of true belief against which alone failure can be construed.²⁸

In interpreting the beliefs of another as intelligible, I must assume that the objects of her beliefs correspond well enough to the objects of my own to permit contrast on points where we plainly disagree; much the same is true in interpreting another's desires. In interpreting the beliefs of another, we must, to make sense of exceptions, assume a pressure in the direction of logical consistency and a pressure in the direction of truth. In interpreting desires, to make sense of exceptions, we must assume a pressure in the direction of transitive consistency and, although less so than in the case of belief, a pressure in the direction of similarity, a prior assumption of homology in desires: "[W]ith desire as with belief, there is a presumption (often overridden by other considerations) that similar causes beget similar evaluations in interpreter and interpreted."²⁹ The Rochester current resuscitates Descartes's evil demon as a democratic legislator, but fails in the same way that skepticism about an outside world or other minds fails.

The Rochester current may object that I misrepresent Riker. He did not say that it is impossible to know other minds, only that there are insufficient data from voting choices to infer underlying preferences. He could say that we know others' beliefs and desires well enough in private life and on the market, but not when we enter public life and the government. Incentives to misrepresent are at least as ubiquitous in private life as in public life, but leave that problem aside. Riker's claim is that if communication is limited to voting choice, then it is impossible to know underlying preferences. This may be so for *each* of our votes taken alone, but from that it does not follow that it is so for *all* of our votes considered together. A series of votes on similar issues would begin to generate enough data to allow inference of underlying preferences, presuming at the individual level logically consistent beliefs, their correspondence to objects, and transitively consistent desires that are sufficiently similar. If communication includes not just voting choices, but the public discussion surrounding the issue, then even more data become

available to “triangulate” on a reading of others’ underlying preferences. In discussion, individuals may sometimes misrepresent their desires and beliefs, but enough must be true to give content to the rest. Finally, the whole of one’s life experience provides additional data and principles for the inference of others’ preferences. The sum of evidence permits one to form judgments about what other people want and know, judgments that are fallible but reliable enough for human affairs.

It is the peculiar misfortune of the skeptic that he is always forced to act as if his conclusions were false. The skeptical philosopher dresses warmly for cold weather and worries about what’s for dinner, even if all his experiences are just delusions. The skeptical political theorist infers preferences behind choices in every human situation, even, as it turns out, in making his case against the possibility of doing so. In analyzing the Wilmot Proviso, Riker confidently identifies eight factions and infers the preferences of each over three alternatives: “There were not enough votes to ascertain preference orders, but it is easy to guess what they were.”³⁰ In analyzing the Powell amendment, from two recorded votes and an implicit auxiliary assumption that elected representatives represent the interests of their districts, Riker confidently identifies five “natural political groups” (!), almost the exact number of representatives in each group, and the preferences of each *group* over three alternatives.³¹ He seems to have forgotten, among other things, that on his account there is no such thing as a district interest that could be discovered by electing a representative. Finally, from minuscule data in an obscure letter written 1900 years ago by Pliny the Younger, Riker is able to identify and estimate the strength of three factions in the Roman Senate on an issue, involved in a process of voting that resulted in the socially better outcome, despite rampant manipulation:

In general, parliamentary situations are like this. Leaders have the kind of [agenda-setting] power that Pliny exercised, but backbenchers can counter with strategic voting. So the fox can be outfoxed. And thus a balance can be maintained, often resulting, as here, in the selection of the . . . socially better outcome.³²

There is one unfortunate difference between the skeptical philosopher and the skeptical political theorist. The philosopher would be ignored if he recommended that human institutions be designed

as if his conclusions were true, but the political theorist might mistakenly be heeded.

3. Is Democratic Discussion Meaningless?

The economic approach to communication emphasizes the problem of credibility: a speaker will make true or false statements about her desires or beliefs only if it is somehow in her interest to do so, only if it furthers her goals. The prototype economic model of communication is Spence's costly signaling game, a two-player, two-stage game of incomplete information.³³ In the costly signaling game there is a sender and a receiver. The sender has private access to some information that the receiver does not have – for simplicity, say, some number between 0 and 1. The sender sends a message about that information to the receiver, and the receiver then takes an action that affects the payoffs of both players. Each player's payoff depends on private information, message, and action. For example, imagine a labor market. The bosses want greater ability in a worker but cannot observe ability directly, more able workers are able to obtain costly education at less cost than less able workers (assume for the sake of the model that education does not increase ability), and a worker knows whether he has high ability or low ability (private information) and then chooses what level of education to attain (message). In equilibrium, the level of education attained acts as a costly signal to bosses such that a high level of education means high ability and a low level of education means low ability, and bosses pay high wages to high-ability workers and low wages to low-ability workers (action). What if the situation were different, what if "education" were something more costly for the high-ability worker than for the low-ability worker? Then, the high-ability worker would not be able to distinguish herself with education, and bosses unable to distinguish ability would pay an average wage to all workers; education would not work as a signal.

Both the high-ability and low-ability workers (senders) in the Spence costly communication model had the same order of preferences over the bosses (receivers') actions – that is, both would like higher wages, and the high-ability worker was able to distinguish herself with a costly signal. In a different sort of situation, a sender may want the receiver to take one action if private information is of one type and to take another action if private information is of another type. Here *costless* communication can be

credible roughly to the extent that the sender's and the receiver's interests coincide; each player's payoff depends on private information and action, but the message is "cheap talk" that does not affect the payoffs. Suppose that sender and receiver have a purely common interest. Sender arrives first at the new vacation spot and telephones receiver to tell him whether the climate is warm (receiver to bring summer clothes for both) or the climate is cold (receiver to bring winter clothes for both). Obviously, sender may confidently send a *costless* signal to receiver; receiver knows that sender will report truly and sender knows that receiver will believe the report and act accordingly. Suppose that sender and receiver have a purely conflicting interest: each wants to eat all the cookies by himself. Sender is in the kitchen, and observes whether or not there are cookies left in the cupboard. Sender could yell out a message to receiver in the front room, either "There are cookies left," or "There aren't cookies left"; receiver knows that sender will not report truly and sender, knowing that, says nothing meaningful (perhaps, "I can't hear you!"). Suppose that sender and receiver have some common interest and some conflicting interest. Sender (suitor) wants receiver (prospective mate) to believe that he is wealthy enough to provide good family security but not so wealthy that receiver thinks she need not contribute outside income to the marriage. One equilibrium is for sender to be somewhat vague but not inaccurate about his wealth.³⁴

Austen-Smith elaborately extends the costless communication model to the topic of talk in political decision making.³⁵ He summarizes the framework in a review essay that I will follow for a while, for the convenience of using the article's informal illustrations for understanding, and then critique. Political talk can be a matter of costly signaling, as in the Spence model: "Insofar as talk is costly – for instance, because statements are easily verifiable by listeners, and liars can be punished – speech can be treated in a similar way to the educational signal."³⁶ But "frequently" political talk is costless and the content of speeches too costly to verify; then the cheap-talk model applies, according to Austen-Smith.

Imagine that there is an uninformed legislator who has to decide among voting for a bill, voting against the bill, or abstaining on the bill. The legislator does not know whether the complicated bill is good or bad for most of her constituents; assume that she assigns a 50 percent chance to each possibility. There is an informed lobbyist who does know for sure whether the bill is good or bad for

Table 3.2. No Communication

		Legislator's Decision		
		<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
Truth	<i>Bill Good</i>	3,3	-1,0	0,2
	<i>Bill Bad</i>	3,0	-1,3	0,2

most of the legislator's constituents. (We can imagine the game as being between one informed legislator and another uninformed legislator as well, but calling the sender the lobbyist and the receiver the legislator makes for easier exposition.) Suppose that incentives are as shown in Table 3.2. The cells describe payoffs to each player given a true statement by the lobbyist and a decision by the legislator. The first number in each cell is the lobbyist's payoff; the second number is the legislator's. What would happen? If the lobbyist made no speech, then the legislator would abstain, because by abstaining the legislator would obtain a payoff of $2 > (\frac{1}{2})(3) + (\frac{1}{2})(0) = \frac{3}{2}$. The legislator would vote for the bill if she knew it were good for constituents and would vote against the bill if she knew it were bad for constituents. Notice that the lobbyist wants the legislator to vote for the bill, no matter whether the bill is good or bad for the legislator's constituents. Suppose the bill actually is good for constituents; then for the lobbyist to tell the truth coincides with his interest in the bill's passage; but it is in the lobbyist's interest to say the bill is good whether it is good or bad; thus, the legislator cannot believe the lobbyist's statement that the bill is good even when it is true, so the lobbyist might as well say nothing. What if the lobbyist says the bill is bad for constituents? The legislator should believe that and vote against the bill, because she would be better off than she would be by abstaining; but the lobbyist would never say that the bill is bad because he wants the legislator to abstain rather than vote against the bill, whether the bill is good or bad. The legislator cannot believe the lobbyist even when there is a common interest between them to vote for the bill when it is good for constituents.

In the preceding illustration (Table 3.2), sender's and receiver's interests are too conflicting for credible communication. Given the

Table 3.3. Honest Communication

		Legislator's Decision		
		<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
Truth	<i>Bill Good</i>	3,3	-1,0	0,2
	<i>Bill Bad</i>	-1,0	3,3	0,2

Table 3.4. Deceptive Communication

		Legislator's Decision		
		<i>For</i>	<i>Against</i>	<i>Abstain</i>
Truth	<i>Bill Good</i>	3,3	1,0	0,2
	<i>Bill Bad</i>	3,0	1,3	0,2

incentives in the following illustration (Table 3.3) their interests are sufficiently common for fully credible communication. The lobbyist always tells the truth, and the legislator always believes him. In the first illustration, shown in Table 3.2, the lobbyist's lie would not be worth the smallest effort, because it would never be believed. Real lying emerges in the third and most interesting illustration, shown in Table 3.4. The legislator's preferences are the same as in the first illustration, and so in the absence of information the legislator prefers to abstain. Now, however, the lobbyist wants the legislator to vote for the bill more than he wants her to vote against the bill, more than he wants her to abstain on the bill. There is some common interest: the lobbyist least prefers that the legislator abstain, and rather than abstain the legislator prefers to vote for the bill if it is good and vote against the bill if it is bad. But if the legislator always believed the lobbyist's statement that the bill is good, the lobbyist would prefer to say the bill is good whether or not that were true, in which case the legislator should abstain.

Rather, suppose the following equilibrium of partial skepti-

cism. The legislator should believe the lobbyist if he says the bill is bad and so vote against the bill; and if the lobbyist says the bill is good, the legislator should believe the lobbyist one-third of the time and thus vote for the bill and ignore him two-thirds of the time and thus abstain on the bill. If the legislator does that, then when the truth is that the bill is bad, the lobbyist can tell the truth and gain a payoff of 1 or lie and say the bill is good and gain a payoff of 1 (because $(\frac{1}{3})(3) + (\frac{2}{3})(0) = 1$). If the truth is that the bill is bad, the lobbyist is indifferent between telling the truth or lying, and the lobbyist lies half the time and says that the bill is good so that he can gain from the chance of tricking the legislator into voting for the bill. If the truth is that the bill is good, the lobbyist always says that the bill is good. The legislator knows when the lobbyist says the bill is good that altogether there is a two-thirds chance that the lobbyist is speaking the truth: the bill truly is good half the time and the lobbyist always says it is good then $-\frac{1}{2}$; the bill truly is bad half the time but then the lobbyist lies and says it is good half of that time $-\frac{1}{2}(\frac{1}{2}) = \frac{1}{4}$ – so when the lobbyist says “good,” his statement is true $(\frac{1}{2})/((\frac{1}{2})+(\frac{1}{4})) = \frac{2}{3}$ of the time. Before hearing from the lobbyist, the legislator thought there was a one-half chance that the bill was good. Knowing that the lobbyist has some common and some conflicting interests, if the legislator hears the lobbyist say the bill is good, then the legislator is able to revise her estimate of the chance that the bill is good from one-half to two-thirds, but not to a sure thing, as in the common-interest case in Table 3.3.

These examples and the marvelous formal models they illustrate are, of course, logically valid. However, the extent to which the notations of the model actually represent things like lobbyists, legislators, and debates is a contestable matter of interpretation. As a former lobbyist, legislative aide, and legislative journalist, I must say that the results of the costless signaling model of political deliberation do not correspond well to my experiences. When I was a lobbyist, the informal but prominent institutional norm made clear to me by legislators was that discovered deception would mean professional death; and I witnessed the norm enthusiastically enforced to end the career of a major lobbyist caught in a single deception of only mild importance. Generally, what legislators want to know from lobbyists, and from each other, is who is for the proposal, who is against the proposal, and what the arguments are on

each side, and they pretty much expect to hear the truth. So what essential features of democratic reality are missing from the costless signaling model?

I think that the cheap-talk model would apply to something like buying a Bible from a door-to-door salesman, but that it does not apply to normal political discussion. Recurrent public interaction about knowable information among multiple senders and multiple receivers, not onetime private interaction about unknowable information in a dyad, is the characteristic structure of the *democratic forum*. I will discuss six problems with the costless signaling model: self-contradiction, single interaction, unverifiable and unprovable information, single sender, single receiver, and experimental disconfirmation.³⁷ First, there is a *contradiction* at the heart of the cheap-talk setup: the lobbyist and the legislator are in a one-shot interaction; they cannot believe one another unless they have some common interests, but the model assumes that preferences are transparent, that somehow they know perfectly one another's interests, common or conflicting. There was no interaction in the past; according to the model, there is only a single interaction. If preferences were *not* transparent, in a single interaction there would not be sufficient information from which to decide whether another person's interests were common or not, because in a single interaction an enemy would imitate a friend and thus conflicting interests would not be discovered. The finding that the sender might sometimes deceive depends on an assumption that the truth occurs often enough for the receiver to have confidently inferred the sender's incentives. Therefore, it is not possible to conclude that because deception is possible in any one instance it is possible in all instances taken together; that would be Riker's error repeated. The costless signaling model does not permit a *generalized* conclusion against the credibility of communication.

Second, what about reputation effects arising from *repeated interactions* between the sender and the receiver? The cheap-talk mixed-strategy equilibrium posits repetition, but it would seem that in a structure of repeated interaction a reputation for consistently providing accurate and valuable information would determine credibility. Reputation is absent from the cheap-talk model because there is something peculiar about the lobbyist's private information: the legislator does not know whether the bill is good or bad for most of her constituents and, according to the model, the legislator will *never* learn from any one or in any way (cheaper than

relying on the lone, fleeting, and deceitful lobbyist), whether or not the lobbyist's statement about the bill being good or bad was true. If the lobbyist deceives, the deception will never be discovered; so the lobbyist has no reputation to protect in repeated interaction. Very few events of public interest are so purely private to one person as that, except sometimes perhaps with respect to another person's real preferences in a single instance (and that is the private information that the cheap-talk model assumes we know perfectly). To allow the lobbyist a reputation, we must allow that the lobbyist's statements are eventually verifiable by the legislator – for example, that after the vote the legislator hears from her constituents as to whether the enacted bill is good or bad. If repeated interactions are permitted, and if the legislator is unsure of the lobbyist's real preferences, then what would legislator and lobbyist do?

The model of credibility by reputation is much closer to my central intuitions about democratic debate than the cheap-talk model.³⁸ There is a series of interactions between the receiving legislator and the sending lobbyist. The legislator does not know the lobbyist's preferences; the legislator is unsure whether the interests of the lobbyist are common or conflicting. The lobbyist makes a statement relevant to a vote, and sometime after the vote the legislator discovers whether or not the statement was true. Let some votes be more important than others to the lobbyist. In this sort of situation, the friendly lobbyist with common interests always tells the truth, of course; the enemy lobbyist with conflicting interests always tells the truth until a vote comes along with a stake so high that he lies in order to cash in on the reputation he developed by telling the truth. The legislator believes whatever a lobbyist says until he discovers a lie, and after that he ignores anything that a lying lobbyist might say. Because others' preferences are normally not transparent to us, we interpret discovered deception as evidence of conflicting interest, and then act accordingly. "When Aristotle was once asked, what a man could gain by uttering falsehoods; he replied, 'not to be credited when he shall tell the truth.'"³⁹

The equivalent of a receiver being able to verify a message is a sender being able to prove a message. Third, then, the basic cheap-talk model above assumed complete *unverifiability and unprovability* of a sender's private information. The reputation model above assumed that the receiver could, after a voting action, completely verify a sender's private information provided before that action.

Now assume an informed sender and an uninformed receiver in a single interaction with no reputation incentives, but now the private information of the sender is completely provable. If the receiver is strategically sophisticated and is well informed about the relevant decision variables and about the preferences of the sender, then the receiver can extract the truth by the strategy of disbelieving the sender unless the sender proves his claim.⁴⁰ Someone might dismiss this result as obvious or trivial, but its intellectual glamour is not what counts; what counts is the scope of its relevance. Much private information about states of the world relevant to public issues is provable. The scope of the result, therefore, is not trivial.

Fourth, the simple cheap-talk model assumes a *single sender*, but in a democratic forum there are usually multiple senders of relevant information. Return to the case of the deceptive lobbyist. One morning our legislator, with the astuteness of a Sherlock Holmes able to discern effortlessly people's innermost desires but frustrated thinking about her upcoming encounter with the deceptive lobbyist, is reading up on cheap-talk models of communication. Suddenly she realizes the solution to her information problem. "Watson," she tells her aide, "find the deceptive lobbyist and the honest lobbyist and show them into my study at four o'clock." The legislator knows that the deceptive lobbyist, whose common and conflicting interests were portrayed in Table 3.4, would not be completely truthful with her. She also knows that the honest lobbyist, whose common interests were portrayed in Table 3.3, would be completely truthful with her. The two lobbyists are seated. Recall that if she had to rely on the deceptive lobbyist alone, she would disbelieve the deceptive lobbyist and abstain from voting two-thirds of the time when he says "bad," so as to force some truth out of him. With the honest lobbyist available, she need no longer follow that strategy; all she has to do is believe the honest lobbyist. What would the deceptive lobbyist do in the presence of the honest lobbyist and the legislator? Incredibly, the deceptive lobbyist would randomize between saying "good" and saying "bad"; in other words, he would become the perfect liar. The deceptive lobbyist would know that the honest lobbyist was telling the truth and that the legislator believed the honest lobbyist; the legislator would believe that the deceptive lobbyist was a perfect liar and the deceptive lobbyist would know that she believed that, but he would lie anyway – all according to the unrealistic assumptions of the cheap-talk model. By going to the honest lobbyist, the legislator did what I try

to do when I find myself confronted with mixed-motive, incomplete, cheap-talk information – the situation *does* occur: she tried to find better information from someone she could better believe. This may be an obvious or trivial point, but remember we are assessing the *general* credibility of communication for the normative purposes of constitutional design.

The fact of multiple senders with conflicting interests may compel a discipline of truthfulness among them, because each has an incentive to correct the other. Samuel Johnson concluded that most falsehoods must originate in vanity, since other opportunities for deception are so well circumscribed:

To the lye of commerce, and the lye of malice, the motive is so apparent, that they are seldom negligently or implicitly received: suspicion is always watchful over the practices of interest; and whatever the hope of gain, or desire of mischief, can prompt one man to assert, another is by reasons equally cogent incited to refute.⁴¹

Johnson's common sense now has the seal of approval from economic theory. Return to the case of complete provability of private information. Now assume multiple informed senders, competing to provide private information sequentially to one uninformed receiver, in a single interaction with no reputation incentives. The strategically sophisticated receiver well informed about decision variables and sender preferences, as before, can compel the truth from a single sender. If the receiver is not sophisticated or well informed, and either if multiple senders' interests are sufficiently opposed or if the receiver wants to advance the senders' general welfare, then the receiver will hear a believably true message from one of the senders: from the one sender who prefers that the decision be based on true information. The combination of skepticism and multiple senders is available for tougher situations.⁴² What if the private information held by multiple senders is not completely provable but rather only partially provable? *Partial provability* is when a sender can prove only part but not all of what she knows, as when time is too short for a complete demonstration or when one asserts a statement like "I am not a traitor."⁴³ If the sequential messages of senders with conflicting preferences over the receiver's actions are *refutable*, then the receiver will uncover the truth by following a simple strategy: believe a claim unless it is refuted.⁴⁴

Fifth, do the strategies of a single sender change if there are *multiple receivers* instead of a single receiver? Montaigne noticed that this was a problem for the clever lobbyists of his acquaintance:

Such men are prepared to make their honor and conscience slaves to present circumstances: but circumstances are liable to frequent change, and their words must vary with them. They are obliged to call the very same thing first grey then yellow, saying one thing to this man, quite another to another. If the persons who receive such contrary advice happen to compare their haul, what becomes of their fine diplomacy? . . . In my time I have known several men who hankered after a reputation for this fine sort of prudence: they can never see that to have a reputation for it renders it ineffectual.⁴⁵

The structure of multiple receivers, depending on the configuration of payoffs, may compel a sender of costless unverifiable claims to convert from falsehood in private to truth in public. Such cheap talk with two audiences is analyzed by Farrell and Gibbons.⁴⁶

Say there is one sender and two receivers – I will vary the sender’s name by situation, but call the receivers “City Mouse” and “Country Mouse” – together as a public. If the interests of each of the receivers – both City Mouse and Country Mouse – in an outcome under consideration are coincident with those of the sender – perhaps the sender is President Mouse – then there is *full communication*. If the interests of each of the receivers conflict with those of the sender – perhaps Generalissimo Cat – then there is *no communication*. It may be that the interests of a sender, Mayor Mouse, coincide with receiver City Mouse’s interests but conflict with receiver Country Mouse’s interests. Mayor Mouse would lie to Country Mouse in private and would tell the truth to City Mouse in private; when all three are together, if Mayor Mouse has more to gain from City Mouse hearing the truth than he has to lose from Country Mouse hearing the same truth, then he will tell the truth in public, dubbed *one-sided discipline* by Farrell and Gibbons. If likable but dim-witted Country Mouse asked Professor Goose to recommend him for a job with City Mouse, the sender Professor Goose would tell his acquaintance City Mouse in private the truth about his friend Country Mouse’s incompetence, but he would have to tell a lie if he was sitting together in the pub with both City Mouse and Country Mouse; this is called *subversion*. Finally, another sender, Senatorial Candidate Pig, might be unbelievable about budgetary priorities in private to either City Mouse or Country Mouse, but credible when

they are joined in public audience; this is known as *mutual discipline*. Public assembly can transform private truth into public falsehood in the case of subversion, or can transform private falsehood to public truth in the case of one-sided discipline or mutual discipline.

Sixth, the hypothesis that humans act and communicate in an exclusively self-concerned and isolated payoff-motivated fashion is robustly *disconfirmed* by numerous controlled *experiments* in decision making. An incentive structure such that the best choice for each individual as an individual is also the worst choice for all of the individuals as a group is known as a prisoners' dilemma or a social dilemma. The game-theoretic predictions are that individuals will defect from rather than cooperate with the best choice for the group and that cheap-talk discussion, including mutual promises to cooperate, will make no difference whatsoever to the decision. Human-subject experiments consistently falsify those predictions. A meta-analysis of thousands of subjects in tens of experiments over three decades found a mean cooperation rate of about 50 percent (standard deviation about 25 percent); the game-theoretic prediction is zero percent. According to one measure in the meta-analysis, frequency of discussion increased the cooperation rate by 40 percent and promise making by 30 percent; the game-theoretic prediction is zero percent.⁴⁷ The experimental results do not disturb the tautologies of formal game theory, but they are relevant to any evaluation of the general credibility of communication and of the desirability of a deliberative democracy.

The basic cheap-talk model is wonderfully elaborated and undoubtedly accounts for some fragments of political communication, but necessarily does not account for the whole of political communication, I have argued. I have tried to show that rational choice models that more fully capture aspects of the characteristic structure of the democratic forum – recurrent public interaction about knowable information among multiple senders and multiple receivers – are closer to our commonsense notions of democratic life. Truth may not triumph in the marketplace of ideas, but it does survive in the public forum.

4. Is Democracy Deception?

A great deal can be learned from the unexceptionable assumption that credibility depends on incentives. For instance, the claim

of a sidewalk panhandler one will never see again is quite different from the claim of a reputable fellow speaker in a democratic forum. The speaker's success depends on her credibility, and her credibility is most easily established by a reputation for consistency among her beliefs, desires, and actions. The beliefs and the desires asserted in today's debate cohere with the rest of her expressed beliefs and desires, so cannot be dismissed as opportunistic; her promises and threats are believed, because her words correspond to her deeds; and there are good reasons for exceptions. Credibility by consistency is possible within the structure of the democratic forum, and works largely as a matter of costly signaling: credibility is hard to win and easy to lose. Austen-Smith acknowledges the costly consistency argument, but argues that the relevant polar case is when speech making is cheap talk, because,

if it is relatively costless for others to determine whether or not any legislator was deliberately misleading in debate, then presumably it is similarly costless for all legislators to obtain all the information, that is, there is no rationale for asymmetries in private information.⁴⁸

In other words, if detecting lies were costless, then everyone would know everything, and there would be no informational reason for communication. However, it is not the case that humans are variably informed because deception is too costly to uncover; rather, humans are variably informed because different individuals lead different lives. Communication is how we learn from each other enough about those different lives so that we can try to live together in peace. One interprets others' actions and statements by means of the consistency assumptions, and makes oneself known to others by displaying consistency; there is simply no alternative. Even among mafiosi (but not to their victims), there is an "absolute obligation to tell the truth."⁴⁹

Unlike the more honorable mafiosi, the cheap-talk lobbyist says to the legislator, "You know me well; I'm honest three-fourths of the time; you can count on that." But it is precisely randomization that we take to be deception, not mere negation. If the lobbyist always makes true statements, then the legislator knows that the lobbyist's statements are true. If the lobbyist always makes false statements, then the legislator knows that the negations of his statements are true.⁵⁰ A professor of politics at the Grand Academy of Lagado misunderstood the randomizing nature of deception: he

directed that every senator in the council of a great nation, after he had delivered his opinion, and argued in the defence of it, should be obliged to give his vote directly contrary; because if that were done, the result would infallibly terminate in the good of the public.⁵¹

If the lobbyist sometimes makes true statements and sometimes makes false statements, then the legislator can't make enough sense of the lobbyist's incentives to decide how much he is lying and how much he is not, except on the unlikely assumption that the legislator already confidently knows the deceitful lobbyist's incentives. There is no meaningful difference between someone who lies to us one-fourth of the time and someone who lies to us three-fourths of the time; both are liars and we don't want any further dealings with either of them. In real life we tend to follow the bright-line rule that a single truth does not make someone honest, but that a single deception does make someone a liar. That is because the beliefs and desires of other minds cannot be known directly; they must be figured out from initial assumptions of consistency. A conspicuous inconsistency on the part of the sender, an inconsistency that results in a loss for the receiver, induces the receiver to conclude that the sender is either useless or malicious. Either the sender was not responsible when he performed one of the two inconsistent actions, because he was afflicted with weakness of will or his agency was damaged in some other way, in which case he is unreliable, or the sender acted as though he wanted the receiver to suffer a loss that she would not have suffered in the absence of the sender's message. As Hume put it, "A man delirious, or noted for falsehood and villainy, has no manner of authority with us."⁵²

One's first and most important approximation of someone else's incentives is an assessment of whether the other player is benevolent, indifferent, or malevolent to one's own welfare. Deception is evidence of malevolence, and the malevolent are best not tested further, or neutralized if avoidance fails. Indeed, it is not untruth itself that repels us, but the malevolence it reveals. Even a malevolent truth is abhorred:

A truth thats told with bad intent
Beats all the Lies you can invent⁵³

And a benevolent untruth might be deeply appreciated:

When my love swears that she is made of truth
I do believe her, though I know she lies.⁵⁴

Deception resembles violence: “Both can coerce people into acting against their will. . . . But deceit controls more subtly, for it works on belief as well as action.”⁵⁵ And when the coercion is malevolent, so much the worse: “If a mafioso does not respect the obligation to tell the truth in the presence of another man of honor, it is a sign that either one or the other of them is soon to die.”⁵⁶

Malevolent coercion is required against enemies in a state of war. As for the state of peace, since liars don't want to get caught, the fact that they err requires explanation. Some lies fail through miscalculation: Montaigne's courtier did not expect his victims to compare notes. Most lies are born of temptation, I think, from the human tendency to form a temporary preference for the poorer but earlier of two goals when the poorer goal is close at hand.⁵⁷ This self-defeating sacrifice of durable reputation for temporary advantage must be the case wherever, given individuals facing the same incentive structures, we are able to distinguish honest from dishonest people, such as in the democratic forum. Some cheap-talk lies go undiscovered. Deception is always possible in human affairs. But political science does not prove that democracy is inaccurate and meaningless. We do not suffer from deception as the consequence of democracy. Rather, we aspire to democracy as the best way to subdue deception.

Notes

1. As to voting, Riker (1982). As to discussion, Austen-Smith and Riker (1987, 1989); Austen-Smith (1990a,b, 1995).
2. Riker strongly influenced the political science profession as well, having published more refereed articles in its premiere journal, the *American Political Science Review*, than any other figure (Miller, Tien, and Peebler 1996).
3. Aranson and Ordeshook (1985).
4. Riker (1982); Riker and Weingast (1988).
5. Miller (1992); Knight and Johnson (1994); Przeworski (Chapter 6, this volume).
6. Updating Schmitt ([1926] 1985).
7. Riker (1982).
8. Riker (1982: 5).
9. Habermas (1984, 1988).

10. "Habermas manages to combine an enormous genius for architectonics with an equally extraordinary disregard for detail. The reader is left with a constant sense of hyperopia – the project seems clear from afar, but becomes fuzzier as one approaches" (Heath 1995: 146).
11. Elster (1986).
12. Manin (1987).
13. Cohen (1989: 19).
14. Austen-Smith and Riker (1987, 1989); Austen-Smith (1990a, b).
15. Austen-Smith and Riker (1987: 907).
16. Austen-Smith (1990a: 75, 93).
17. Austen-Smith (1995).
18. Riker (1982: 236), emphasis added.
19. *Ibid.*, 237.
20. *Ibid.*
21. *Ibid.*
22. Mackie (1997).
23. On the last point, compare Hinich and Munger (1994).
24. Riker seems to think that "revealed choices" are directly observed. However, direct observation is of bodily movements, from which intentional actions such as "revealed choices" are inferred. Without this initial confusion of behavior with action, Riker's "meaninglessness" argument wouldn't get off the ground.
25. Shapin (1994); Coady (1992).
26. Davidson (1991a: 193).
27. Davidson (1991b: 160).
28. Davidson (1980: 222).
29. Davidson (1986: 208).
30. Riker (1982: 227).
31. Riker (1986: 118–22).
32. *Ibid.*, 85.
33. Spence (1973).
34. Incentives and solution adapted from Farrell and Rabin (1996); the story is mine.
35. Austen-Smith (1990a, b, 1992, 1995).
36. Austen-Smith (1992: 46).
37. Austen-Smith's (1990b) formal model of committee debate has three sending and receiving legislators (engaged in pivotal-voter reasoning), and thus is more realistic with respect to the fourth and fifth problems. However, recall that elsewhere pivotal-voter reasoning leads to the false prediction that no one would vote in elections where the electorate was larger than committee size (e.g., Mueller 1989: 350).
38. I am summarizing and adapting Sobel (1985).
39. Johnson ([1753] 1963: 361).
40. Milgrom and Roberts (1986).

41. Johnson ([1753] 1963: 363).
42. Milgrom and Roberts (1986).
43. I have never been to Iceland. I can't *prove* that I have never been to Iceland, but I can refute each of an accuser's particular allegations, say, that I have gone to Iceland every Christmas for the past five years.
44. Lipman and Seppi (1995).
45. Montaigne ([1592] 1987: 1592: 34–35; I:9), "On Liars."
46. The following summarizes some of Farrell and Gibbons (1989); the animal examples are entirely my fault. There are conditions involving similar prior beliefs among the receivers that might result in noncommunication from the sender in the discipline cases.
47. Sally (1995).
48. Austen-Smith (1990b: 129).
49. Falcone and Padovani (1993: 58–61). Thanks to Federico Varese for the reference.
50. Compare Lewis's (1969: 147–51) convention of truth.
51. Swift ([1726] 1955: 207).
52. Hume ([1777] 1975: Section X, Part 1).
53. "Auguries of Innocence," in Blake (1978: 1313).
54. Sonnet 138 in Shakespeare (1985).
55. Bok (1978: 18).
56. Falcone and Padovani (1991: 57).
57. Ainslie (1992).

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