Thresholds of Disillusionment*

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Abstract: Disillusionment is a critical process in the study of democracy, often described as the gap between constituents' expectations and realized political outcomes. Drawing on theories of agenda setting and political identity, this paper offers a model of disillusionment that incorporates perceptions of policy power. I propose the existence of a threshold of disillusionment — a point at which constituents deem the status quo unviable and pursue alternatives within and outside existing institutions. I argue that these alternatives are pursued with the intention to consolidate policy power. This approach expands the existing literature by providing new insights into the relationship between perceptions of (limited) policy power and political behavior. The paper concludes with real-world examples of pathways out of disillusionment and directions for future research that might aid our understanding of how democracy can function more inclusively.

Keywords: disillusionment, policy power, agenda setting, political behavior, democratic institutions

Introduction

Existing literature frames disillusionment as a process by which constituents perceive a lack of political progress and react by pursuing alternatives both within and outside of existing institutions. While much of the literature emphasizes the role of frustration between the gap between the ideals of democratic equity and the realities of social injustice, this paper extends existing theories by proposing a simple, formalized model of how disillusionment develops over time. Specifically, I argue that disillusionment arises from constituents' perceptions of limited policy power within the status quo.

This model introduces the concept of a *threshold of disillusionment* — a critical point at which constituents deem the status quo unviable and begin to seek alternatives. This formalization of disillusionment gives rationale to the decision to seek such alternatives; constituents pursue these alternatives with the goal of recovering policy power. I explore two real-world examples discussed in the literature and suggest directions for future theoretical and empirical research. By formalizing the process of disillusionment, this paper contributes to a deeper understanding of how democracy can work for all involved.

The paper is structured as follows. In the following section I synthesize existing arguments explaining gaps in policy power between minoritized and majority constituencies[1]. I then review existing literature on difficulties in agenda setting that make policy power difficult to consolidate for minoritized constituencies. In the section that follows I review the disillusionment literature and contribute the perspective of policy power to the theoretical discussion. The section after is

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[1] Throughout the paper, the phrasing "minority/minoritized" refers to marginalized persons or populations along some social dimension — race/ethnicity, class, disability, etc. To avoid confusion with party definitions of minority I use the word "minoritized" as appropriate.

devoted to the setup and discussion of a model of disillusionment that incorporates perceptions of policy power and lays the foundation for future discussions of thresholds of disillusionment. The penultimate section presents a discussion of pathways out of disillusionment and the relevant literature, and the conclusion follows.

Chasms in Policy Power

To understand why some constituencies lack policy power relative to the majority, I draw on existing agenda setting and identity literature. I argue that the chasm of policy power between majority and minoritized constituencies is made difficult to overcome by competition among minoritized groups over how remaining policy power is distributed.

For minoritized populations, agenda setting power is complicated by nuanced and polylithic policy needs. McClain and Carew (2017) provide historical evidence for the difficulties faced in the development of an interminority coalition between Blacks, Asian Americans, and Latinos. They note that, relative to the white racial majority in America, these minoritized groups must contend with a shared perception of conflict over policy power, as these groups are equally deficient in such influence (McClain and Carew 2017:251; Blalock 1967). Because policy power is a scarce resource, competition over the allocation of what little influence is left for minoritized groups becomes contentious. For example, Angelo Falcón notes that in New York, Black Americans believed the allocation of resources toward bilingual education would draw resources away from desegregation efforts (Falcón 1988; McClain and Carew 2017:253). Competing interests make policy power difficult to consolidate across interminority constituencies.

For the same reasons, intraracial coalitions are just as difficult to form. In the case of the Black diaspora, Smith (2014) finds that the sets of policy needs identified by Black Americans and

Black immigrants often do not intersect. Indeed, as described above concerning competition over policy power between Blacks and Latinos, Black American and Black immigrant policy needs often compete with one another. Through focus group interviews, Smith reveals that Black Americans often relegate issues that affect Black immigrants to the bottom of their policy ambitions, if these issues make the list at all (196). Issues such as immigration reform are seen by some Black Americans as matters of foreign policy, with no meaningful consequences for their community. Likewise, issues relating to social justice and education reform are more important to Black Americans than Black immigrants (184). For these reasons, the definition and development of a unified Black agenda proves difficult (175).

In sum, the difficulties of policy cohesion make policy power difficult to consolidate for minoritized constituencies. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the contentious and complex nature of minoritized policy complicates placing minority issues on the agenda. In some ways, these factors might *incentivize* legislators to deny policy incorporation to minoritized constituencies wholesale.

Issue Neglect

Consistent with the above discussion concerning the complexities of crafting policy for minoritized groups, Peay (2021) argues that policies benefitting minoritized groups are contentious. Policies in these issue spaces lead to arduous policymaking processes in the form of battles between the "haves" and the "have-nots" (409). It follows that preparation for the proposal of such policies requires bargaining between legislators that, at some reductive level, represent both sides.

In studying the agenda setting power of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC), Peay finds that even when CBC members chair committees, bills that are sponsored by members of the CBC still face strict winnowing (402). Peay attributes this finding, in part, to classic theories of agenda setting that posit that parties optimize for party stability in their agenda setting calculus (Peay 2021:406; Cox and McCubbins 2005:24). Building on this general theoretical tenet, Peay finds empirical evidence for the systematic deprioritization of bills at the committee stage based on the racial identity of the sponsor. Likewise, he finds evidence for the disproportionate winnowing of bills addressing issues targeted by the CBC. Though Peay's study is limited to descriptive representation (that is, Black lawmakers' ability to affect meaningful policy movement for Black communities), it serves as a natural segue into the discussion of disillusionment for a multiplicity of constituencies. Despite decades of struggle for access to the franchise and incorporation into rooms where decisions are made, Peay provides empirical evidence that legislative representation does not always guarantee policy change. I argue that constituents are attuned to this and become disillusioned as a result.

On Disillusionment

I argue that for minoritized constituencies, the perception of this issue neglect is at the core of the disillusionment process. I begin by adopting Ray Block Jr.'s definition of disillusionment — the perceived gap between *what is* and *what ought to be* (Block 2010:31) — and build on this definition by claiming that disillusionment occurs as a result of perceived paradoxes in the policymaking process. Despite CBC-committee incorporation, a Black president, and a Black-Indian female vice president, the policy landscape for minoritized groups has improved only slightly. Marginalized populations have incorporated into the policymaking process — why has the policy landscape failed to keep up?

This paradox is in part explained by the above discussion of contemporary chasms in policy power. But it important to note that disillusionment is not just a contemporary issue. Michael Dawson writes that prominent historical civil rights thinkers such as Bunche, Du Bois, and King all experienced a transition "from hope to despair" during the Civil Rights Movement (Dawson 2001). Dawson writes that King's disillusionment contributed to his willingness to "stretch public policy beyond the mainstream white norms" for the sake of equity. King found it strange that in any given city's labor market, Black workers were often overrepresented in menial labor (*what is*) as opposed to being evenly distributed across all labor sectors with respect to their share of the population (*what ought to be*) (Dawson 2001:277; King 1967:144). Deeper than a perception of the gap between what is and what ought to be, King's desire to "stretch" policy — and his perception of the country's inability to do so — is indicative of his sensitivity to a gap in policy power.

Likewise, Du Bois found himself wrestling with democratic theory in the face of staunch injustice. Du Bois' reckoning with the reality of American democracy took him around the world, after which he concluded that the United States' governance bordered on oligarchy (Dawson 2001:276; Du Bois 1975). Indeed, the Roosevelt administration's lack of commitment to "any serious racial justice program" shifted Du Bois' political thought toward communism (Dawson 278). Du Bois' critique is clearly related to a gap in policy power, which drove him to explore an alternative outside existing American institutions.

These shifts to the left, as Dawson describes them, are indicative of what Bunche describes as "profound frustration" and "complete disillusionment" among all Black Americans, not just prominent thinkers (Dawson 2001:273, 277). The discussion section of this paper will discuss pathways from disillusionment, but the key evidence that Dawson provides is that thought

leaders perceive gaps between what is and what ought to be, and their perceptions are rooted in chasms in policy power. Building on Bunche, I argue that perceptions of gaps in policy power are just as salient among everyday Americans as they are among the most prolific of thought leaders.

Thresholds of Disillusionment

I argue that the development of disillusionment — whether among thought leaders or everyday citizens — is a recursive process. In other words, constituents begin with some idea of *what ought to be* and continuously update their belief about *what is* over time. In this section I provide a simple model of disillusionment. I then discuss the ways in which this model might incorporate the existence of some *threshold* of disillusionment that triggers deviation from the status quo.

Imagine a constituent who potentially becomes disillusioned by a lack of policy progress while maintaining her status quo loyalty to her party. Her level of disillusionment is represented by an infinite-horizon dynamic program that plays out over several election years $t \in \{1, 2, ..., T\}$. The constituent's level of disillusionment at time t, given by $D_t \in (-\infty, 0]$, is a function of her level of disillusionment in previous periods and two terms to follow. I assume that disillusionment is an inherently negative state, where $D \to 0$ reflects decreasing disillusionment, and that the constituent starts with no disillusionment, $D_0 = 0$.

Let $\rho_{t-1}(\alpha_{t-1}) \in [-1,1]$ denote the constituent's perceived level of issue prioritization by her party in the previous time period. The constituent observes her party's level of issue prioritization in the form of meaningful policy movement between time periods. For example, $\rho_{t-1} \to -1$ as policy moves *away from* the constituent's preferred direction between the previous and current periods; $\rho_{t-1} \to 0$ if there is no meaningful policy movement between the previous and current

periods; and $\rho_{t-1} \to 1$ if policy moves in her preferred direction. Note that policy movement is itself a function of $\alpha_t \in [0, \infty)$, which represents the agenda setting power held by legislators that represent her interests (e.g., the Congressional Black Caucus). Finally, assume a fixed discount factor $\delta > 0$ that represents the constituent's desire for immediate policy movement versus policy movement in future periods[2]. This term is motivated theoretically by existing conceptualizations of disillusionment as general frustration with a lack of political progress.

The full program is expressed by

$$D_t = D_{t-1} + \rho_{t-1}(\alpha_{t-1}) - \delta; \ D_0 = 0$$

Though performing an induction exercise on this program is beyond the scope of this paper, a few key observations stand out. In line with the literature discussed above, the party's issue prioritization is operationalized via policy movement (ρ). Legislative movement *against* the constituent's interests dramatically worsens her disillusionment; no movement still contributes to disillusionment (via δ); and policy movement in accordance with the constituent's interests *reduce* her disillusionment. This term highlights the importance of a party's policy responsiveness in the development (or staving off) of constituent disillusionment. Also note that policy movement is a function of the level of agenda setting power (α) held by lawmakers that represent the constituent's interests. Legislators who are successful in setting the agenda for the constituent's interests (high α) play a key role in reducing disillusionment by moving policy in her preferred direction. Finally, note the impact of the constituent's time preferences (δ). In this model, the constituent incurs a constant cost for waiting on policy change. High δ implies that she places more weight on immediate policy movement; low δ indicates a willingness to wait for

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[2] I constrain $\delta > 0$ to reflect the assumption that the constituent would like to see policy move in her direction at some point.

future policy change. Again, with $\delta > 0$, the subtraction of δ means that unless policy moves in the constituent's direction, she will become increasingly disillusioned simply as a function of time. This ensures the model is consistent with existing conceptualizations of disillusionment.

In this simple model, disillusionment is intentionally left unbounded below. Of particular interest to the future development and analysis of this model is the existence of one (or multiple) "thresholds" of disillusionment. That is, *does there exist some γ such that $D_t \leq \gamma$ causes the constituent to deviate from her status quo in the next time period*? This threshold has a key implication that aligns with the theoretical discussions above. The constituent will seek an alternative that minimizes her disillusionment, ostensibly by optimizing policy movement in her direction via greater agenda setting power.

Should this threshold exist, several pathways from disillusionment exist. These pathways have been explored in existing literature; in the next section I offer a review and critique of this literature in the context of the model presented above.

Discussion: Pathways from Disillusionment

Critical to the discussion of disillusionment is theorization regarding the behavior disillusioned constituents take when they reach the threshold of disillusionment. Within existing literature, pathways out of disillusionment are *implied* to be deliberate attempts to recover policy power via some alternative. I argue that making this principle explicit is key to advancing our understanding of behavior under disillusionment, both theoretically and empirically.

Dawson's theoretical discussion of outcomes related to disillusionment relate specifically to movement to the right. Specifically, Dawson identifies Black conservatism as a preeminent ideological path for Black Americans post-disillusionment (Dawson 2001:280). However, under

the lens of the consolidation of policy power these transitions suggest several puzzles. Indeed, Dawson notes that despite marginal evidence that suggest the existence of Black conservative views on several social issues, the electoral failures of Black conservative candidates and marginal mass support on Black conservative policy platforms continue to puzzle Black conservative constituents (Dawson 2001:281-283; see also Kilson 1993). Theoretical and empirical evidence suggests conservatism to be unsuccessful in consolidating power among Black Americans. Future work would benefit from attempting to understand the disillusionment-to-conservatism pipeline in the context of policy power consolidation, especially in light of Black Republican support for Trump in recent years.

Historical movements within and further toward liberalism suggest much of the same puzzlement. Indeed, Jesse Jackson's Rainbow/PUSH Coalition represented a concerted effort among disillusioned constituencies to consolidate power within the established institution of the Democratic Party. At a turning point in the Democratic Party's management of civil rights, Jackson's Rainbow Coalition was built on the premise of mobilizing a base of Black Democratic voters that would be supported by several other Democratic constituencies along the lines of race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, and other socially-disadvantaged identities. By focusing on valence issues, Jackson's two campaigns were successful in integrating progressive policy perspectives into campaign debates (McClain and Carew 2017:167). However, the success with which Jackson actually established policy power among the constituencies in the Rainbow Coalition is unclear, given his inability to reach office. The implications of this example are twofold. First, future work should examine why attempts to consolidate policy power among *both* the ideological left and right have failed. Second, future work should expand the scope of disillusionment to multiple minoritized groups. Though of a particular nature, disillusionment is

not limited to Black Americans and racial injustice. Future work should study the lifecycles and consequences of disillusionment among a multiplicity of marginalized groups.

It should be made clear that one of the underlying assumptions of the discussion of these pathways is the viability of alternatives that constituents seek. To adopt parlance from Thomas Schelling (1978), conceptualizations of disillusionment that assume constituents always seek alternatives are "open-ended" models. In an open-ended model of disillusionment, constituents deviate from the status quo with certainty if their disillusionment reaches some threshold, regardless of the prospect of greater policy power in the alternative. However, a "closed" interpretation of disillusionment also merits discussion, whereby constituents deviate from the status quo if and only if prospects for policy power are greater in the alternative relative to the status quo. The open-ended/closed conceptualizations of disillusionment might help explain why disillusionment is observed in evaluations of some Americans' attitudes, but not others' (Block 2010:43).

Conclusion

Existing literature frames disillusionment as a process by which constituents perceive a lack of political progress and react by pursuing alternatives within and outside of existing institutions. By drawing on theories of agenda setting, I have offered a formalization of the process by which constituents develop a sense of disillusionment. I contribute to existing theories of disillusionment by proposing a simple model of the development of disillusionment. In this model, disillusionment is an attitude that develops over time from a perception of limited policy power within the status quo. The contribution of the perception of limited policy power extends the literature beyond general frustration with the gap between what is and what ought to be.

As a function of policy power, I have argued for the existence of a *threshold* of disillusionment — a point at which a constituent deems the status quo unviable and seeks alternatives within and outside existing institutions. Building on previous literature, I have argued that these alternatives are sought with the specific goal of increasing policy power. I have briefly discussed real-world examples of pathways out of disillusionment and offered directions for future theoretical and empirical research. The study of disillusionment is important to understanding how democracy can work for all participants.

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