

Informationalism, Sense-Making, and Activism in 2022 Politics

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The politics of 2022 are affected by conditions that could scarcely be imagined at the time of the preceding midterm election. The results of the 2020 presidential election were disputed with a riot that breached the US Capitol attempting to prevent the Electoral College from declaring a 2020 winner. A difficult pandemic is beginning a third year of disruption of normal activities. Evaluating the dangerousness of pandemic conditions continues on an almost daily basis. This paper is an attempt to analyze how these unusual factors influence ordinary voter decisions. The problem is seen as requiring some perspective on how people evaluate unusual information relevant to politics. Reactions to developments in information technology complexity and various types of political activism are analyzed as they make more difficult voter sense making in 2022. The paper is an attempt to improve conceptual development about the trajectory of public opinion resulting from this social reality.

Public opinion research has recognized the complicating influence of the COVID-19 pandemic on electoral conditions in 2022. Ternullo analyzes the “distinctive trajectories of opinion formation” that have occurred since the pandemic began. According to Ternullo in

the present era, opinion formation happened as people “confronted the complex information environment armed with varying levels of trust in media and political knowledge” (Ternullo, 2022, p. 1)

Internet and mobile communications have made a vast amount of information available at all times. When political information is readily available, political participation increases. Lack of political information deters involvement with politics. Empowerment happens when people have substantial political information at their fingertips. Theoretically mobile devices would significantly increase informed and reasonable citizen participation. Paradoxically, unusual protest activism from various different political perspectives is gaining in factorial influence. Simultaneously, difficult environmental conditions, a pandemic, have placed unusual demands upon political reasoning. The nature of this crisis is such that citizens must continually evaluate social realities they confront. Gains in informationalism produced by Internet substantially influences voter sense making about these conditions.

This paper attempts to analyze to what extent ordinary citizen evaluation of politics has changed as a result of activism and crisis conditions. Narrative analysis makes possible this social science analysis. Images of political activism from 2020 and 2021 can be sampled so as to produce a narrative of protest politics in these years. Theoretical sampling allows identifying images conceptually useful in analyzing the electoral reality resulting from

advances in information technology and political activism. The definition that qualitative methods has made of narrative allows almost anything that can be found to have a story-line to qualify as narrative. Czarniawska analyzes the usefulness of narrative and concludes, “A student of social life, no matter of which domain, needs to become interested in narrative as a form of social life, a form of knowledge, and a form of communication.” (Czarniawska, 2004, p. 13).

Photographs are excellent narrative as a collection of them can construct a vivid portrayal of political happenings. Such a series of images has the ability to be inclusive of the idiosyncratic conditions distinguishing the political epoch being researched. A story can be devised about how each photo included in a narrative came to happen. Together a series of photo have an ability to evoke all sorts of reasoning from an audience. As Mason and Davies conclude, “Of course it is still productive to explore the context of a photo and talk about what is not contained in the image as well as what is.” (Mason and Davies, 2011, p. 38)

The informational realities that have produced the politics of 2020 and 2021 are more sophisticated than in the past. Gone are the days when political information could reliably be received from a few prominent newscasters. In the present, citizens are left deciphering an enormous amount of information delivered in a myriad of different ways. How voters interpret all the complex political information now available to them is a concern of this

paper. Improved understanding of how these social realities are likely to affect the politics of 2022 is an objective of this paper.

The Politics of Information Sense-Making

Personal knowledge management has never been more politically relevant than in the present day. Mainstream media has difficulty framing present political reality. The relevance of various happenings to this year's politics is more conjecture than usual. Since the US Capitol was breached on January 6, 2021, evaluating what leading politicians have to say has become more difficult. The courts are still actively involved in assisting the public comprehend this disturbance. A congressional commission is investigating the Capitol riot. Various litigation is in progress that could eventually affect those political leaders that appear to have condoned the January 6th riot. The partisan division on Capitol riot issues is still substantial.

A party pundit, Tim Miller who was formerly associated with Jeb Bush's campaign, was reported to have said, "Congressional Republicans have assessed that they need to max out the Trump vote to win. That is the path back to the majority." Miller continues that the window for the Republican Party to distance itself from Trump seems to have passed. According to Miller, "There was a chance after January 6 for Republican leaders to really

put their foot down and say 'we can't be the insurrectionist party.' Now that opportunity is totally gone." (Oliphant, 2021)

These conditions combine to adversely affect the reliability of mainstream media. The increasing ability of voters to access any information about politics of interest on their mobile device has not had a positive effect on approval of mainstream media. Protest activism has made voters more critical of the news framing that has long been mainstream media's prime commodity. The Ternullo study found that "an overwhelming number" of people with whom the researcher spoke had "some degree of distrust in the 'media' " (Ternullo, 2022, p. 6)

The ability of social media to produce order from chaotic politics is a great question for 2022's politics. A scenario with influential social media could produce outcomes not readily predicted by mainstream media. Since 2008, the social media's influential strength has not been misunderstood. Two American presidents, Obama and Trump, have won the White House with the most Facebook friends, Twitter followers, an Instagram followers. Somehow social media does maintain the momentum a campaign needs to succeed.

Momentum is only one possible explanation for the influence social media has been gaining. Political campaigns that control social media contentiously have more ability to win. Alternatively, one could theorize that social media serves a vital function in sense making about political information. Determining what is and what is not relevant political

information has always had much influence. Mainstream media controlled relevant information since before the advent of television. Recently, however, social media has begun performing a significant amount of news decisions.

Bajic has analogized social media to a game with various players all of whom have their own “motives and objectives.” One’s involvement with this game is through trial and error moves which are evaluated as gaining “acceptance or disapproval from the group.” As the game progresses, “eventually you decide the rules and play the game.” This Bajic describes as “sensemaking in action.” This activity results in you “constructing a mental map of what you can’t see.” (Bajic, 2020)

As social media works, one's online cohorts have influence determining what news is presented to you. Politicians who aspire to succeed with social media need to manipulate this grouping effect. The artful political skills that cause one's personal news to reach throughout the social network may be competing with social media advertising. The genius who knows how to manipulate politics with social media is a contemporary advertising success. Knowing where to place the right ads on social media can prove a meaningful success factor in political campaigns.

Much analysis of social media's role in influencing the political agenda imagines social media to be a spontaneous source of ideas from the people. Mainstream media is basically

seen as reacting to those ideas emerging from social media. When one includes the advertising that permeates social media, one is left questioning how to support the conclusion that social media is an authentic source of popular ideas. Morrison reports, “The Trump campaign spent tens of millions of dollars on millions of Facebook ads in 2016, sometimes running tens of thousands of ad variations a day to microtarget potential voters with messages tailored to their interests.” (Morrison, 2020) Were there not so much viral content in social media one might give up altogether on the idea that social media is well connected to popular reasoning.

Researching Electoral Conditions in 2022

The imagination that the election 2022 has special properties is strong. There are several important influences that contend as determinants of electoral choice in 2022. First, a pandemic has had drastic influence on American society for two years. Second, political realities have been affected by an increased level of dissident activism. A large-scale riot breached the US Capitol on January 6, 2021 in an attempt to prevent the Electoral College electing a new president. Protests have occurred at various locations about climate change. Riots in Portland, Oregon have produced weeks of disorder and involved thousands of people. Third, information technology has continued making relentless advances in sophistication and inclusiveness. Information technology empowerment and social network empowerment have become recognized influences in our political culture. Fourth,

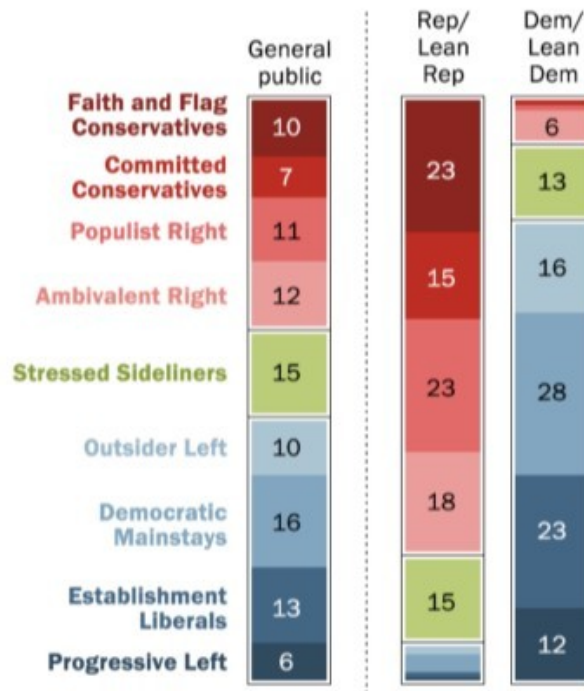
the influence of the traditional two American political parties in influencing voter choice is experiencing some meaningful changes. Divisions within the Republicans and the Democrats about some fundamental issues are lessening the influence of these two political parties. Research attempts to improve how these conditions are likely to affect voter choice in 2022 has significance. This paper intends to produce some conceptual development useful in analyzing election politics in 2022.

The changes in the American political typology can be analyzed with survey data from the Pew Research Center. As the Pew Report of November 9, 2021 states, “Yet the gulf that separates Republicans and Democrats sometimes obscures the divisions and diversity of views that exist within both partisan coalitions – and the fact that many Americans do not fit easily into either one.” (Pew, November 9, 2021) Figure One presents the divisions that Pew Research identifies in the U. S.’s two major political parties. Internal divisions within the Republicans are about affinity for businesses and corporations, support for low taxes and opposition to abortion. The Democrats evidence substantial internal differences on the importance of religion in society and whether systemic change is required to achieve the goal of combating racial inequality. An other source of dissent within the parties is the difference between highly politically engaged, more ideological voters and less engaged voters – many of them younger – with weak partisan ties. (Pew, November 9, 2021).

Figure One
The 2021 Political Typology

The 2021 political typology

% of ____ who are ...



Source: Survey of U.S. adults conducted July 8-18, 2021.

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

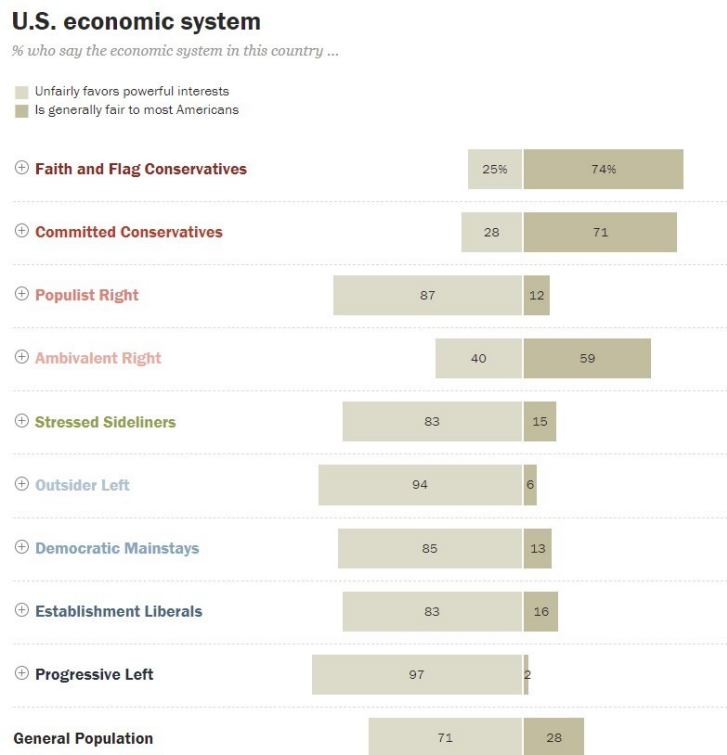
(source: Pew, November 9, 2021)

Pew data allows analyzing specific ideological rifts that appear happening in the two political parties.

Figure Two presents findings about how people divide when ask about the fairness of the economic system. Differences between those who are traditional conservatives and the

populist right are presented as significant by this data. Contrasting the attitudes of the political side liners to traditional Republicans also evidences great differences in attitudes.

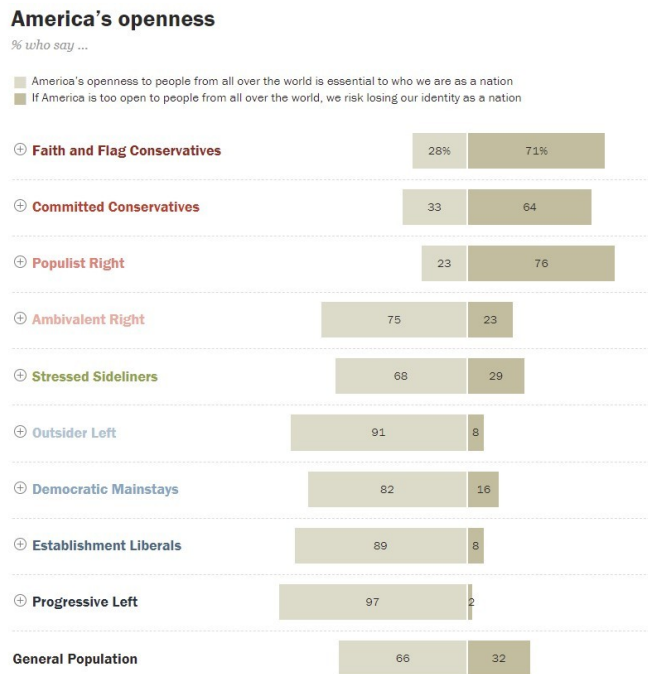
Figure Two
U. S. Economic System Attitudes and Political Typology Groups



(source: Pew, November 9, 2021)

Figure Three presents data that is relevant to improved perception of the influence of information technology and social networking developments on our politics. This table indicates that there is not much agreement within the parties as to the meaningfulness of social networking globalism.

Figure Three
Openness Attitudes and Political Typology Groups



(source: Pew, November 9, 2021)

Figure Four is likewise useful in improved understanding of the globalism issue. While there are differences within both parties, some of the most dramatic inter-party differences found in this data occurs on this issue within the Republicans. This data is indicative that there is no agreement among Republicans about the gains from information technology globalism.

Figure Four
U. S. Interests Attitudes and Political Typology Groups

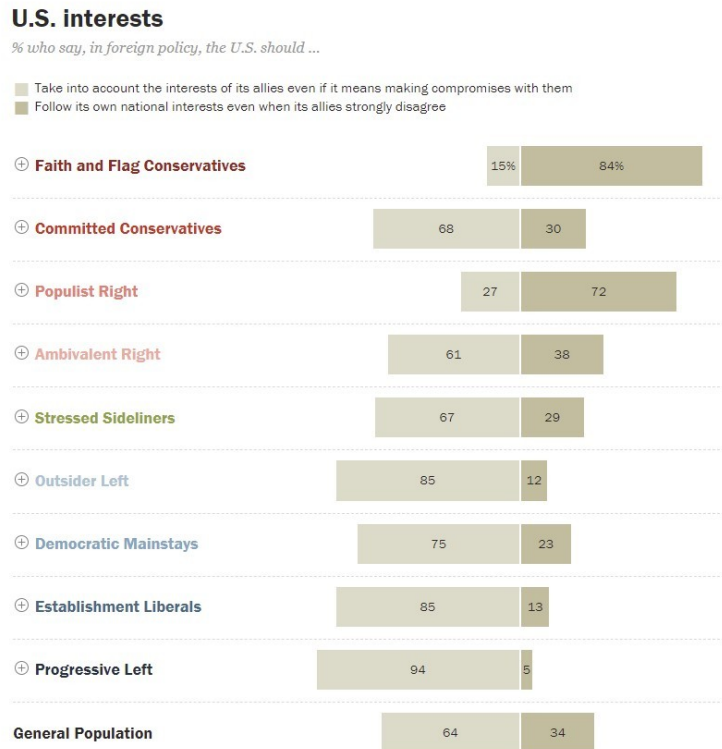
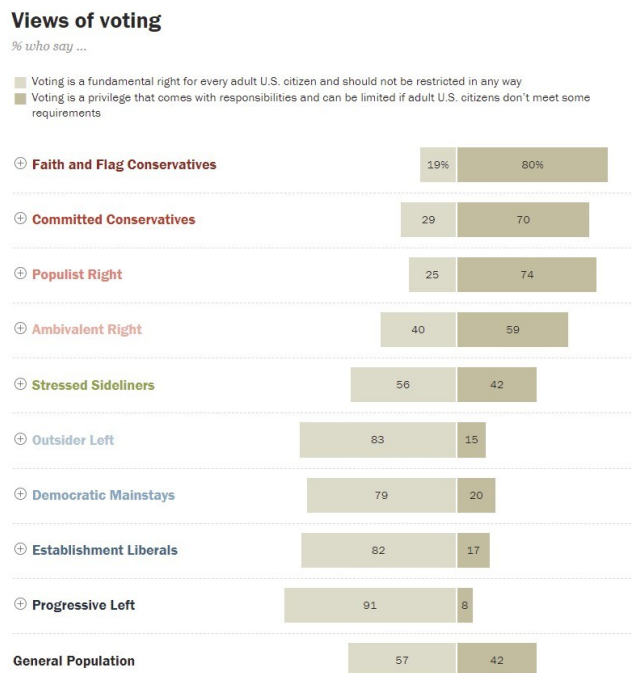


Figure Five improves understanding of how those within the two parties regard the issue of increased inclusiveness. Information technology and social networking are often advocated because they offer possibilities for improved inclusiveness. The ability of technology to reach throughout the population is often seen as one of the strengths of these innovations. The Pew data presents that this phenomenon is not seen as popular to all people. On the basis of this data, one could better imagine that inclusiveness could, in fact, be a divisive issue within the two major parties.

Figure Five
Views of Voting Attitudes and Political Typology Groups



A Qualitative Research Design Using Narrative

The paper's objective of becoming more perceptive about the unusual electoral conditions that exist in 2022 can be more thoroughly accomplished with a qualitative research design. Creating a narrative with images about three important concepts in this analysis can produce knowledge building. First, images about happenings and attitudes about advances in information technology are useful. The idea that technological determinism is an important factor cannot altogether be dismissed. Second, image narrative about the influential protest activism of the preceding months is important in connecting the analysis of 2022 conditions with what has been happening besides the ordinary happenings of American politics. Third, an image narrative depicting how Americans use technology, social networking, political parties, and ordinary political participation to accomplish sense making of events occurring around them is useful. Political reasoning in 2022 is becoming more sophisticated and all of these factors are now relevant to voter choice.

Images from Internet are possibly data that can be used to get at the important research question of this paper. Using qualitative methods techniques relevant data can be identified adequate to allow a social science analysis of electoral conditions in 2022. Theoretical sampling of images about politics and the pandemic and reactions to the January 6th riot allow devising narratives.

Figure One
Informationalism in 2021-22





Figure Two
Political Activism in 2021-22





Strategies for Sense-Making Likely Influence Politics in 2022

Indicators that 2022 is likely to be among the most difficult elections in recent years to decipher abound. Voters traditionally rely upon several influences in electoral choice. Mainstream media has for decades been a leading influence defining the choices voters must make at the polls. Political parties have likewise been major factors determining electoral decisions. In 2022, both of these influences are somewhat weaker. Contending electoral choice variables are more numerous. Influences that would ordinarily be

dismissed as exogenous influences now are more contentious than ever. Strategies that voters use to make sense of these changing political conditions reveal something about ingenious techniques people use to resolve cognitive complexity.

Figure Three
Sense-Making in 2021-22





Conclusions

The politics that are happening in America as the pandemic evolves into an endemic are likely to be somewhat different than what we have known in preceding years. The convergence of continual meaningful developments in information technology and protest activism are likely to unsettle some established assumptions about political outcomes. Parties are changing, and developments in technology continue to confront our political culture with many issues including ideas about our economic system, the global openness of our culture, our global values with regard to friends and foes, and to how much we believe in a more inclusive society. The extensive use of information technology during the pandemic has only strengthened these trends in American politics. Social protest has become a more prominent feature of American politics than anyone imagined would ever happen. The events of January 6, 2021 when the US Capitol was breached may prove to have a long lasting influence in our political coalitions and in how our political culture is regarded globally. The riots that occurred in Portland, Oregon in 2021 effectively reinforce beliefs that protest remains an influence in our politics.

The American voter may possibly find this all somewhat confusing. Traditional political parties are not delivering the same clear perspectives they have produced in preceding decades. Voters are more dissatisfied with mainstream media than in the past. Social networking is gaining as a means of sense making about political happenings. The extent to which social media is a popular phenomenon remains a great issue. Claims that skillfully placed social media advertising controls political outcomes are questionable. The mechanisms that produce public opinion from social networking are only beginning to be understood. How extensively social media can be manipulated for political purpose with adjustments of network formulas and artificial intelligence are concerns as our politics continues to be influence by changing technology.

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