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## *The invented state. Policy misperceptions in the American public*

Emily Thorson

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In the modern context of political discourse, considerable academic interest has been directed towards the growth of misinformation and its effect on democratic procedures. However, this focus on explicit falsehoods has obscured a more pervasive and potentially consequential phenomenon: widespread misperceptions about existing public policies. Through this book, Emily Thorson introduces the concept of the Invented State, which encapsulates citizens' collective misunderstandings about their government's current policies and practices. This work demonstrates that policy misperceptions are not merely products of partisan bias or deliberate misinformation campaigns but often

arise from citizens' well-intentioned attempts to comprehend a complex political landscape. By examining the origins, prevalence, and consequences of these misperceptions, Thorson offers critical insights into the nature of political knowledge and its role in shaping democratic competence. Furthermore, it challenges prevailing assumptions about public engagement with policy information and proposes novel approaches to enhancing citizen understanding of governance structures and practices.

In Chapter 1, Thorson establishes the concept of the Invented State and widespread misperceptions about existing public policies. It situates the work within the broader literature on political knowledge and misinformation, arguing that policy misperceptions threaten democratic competence. Thorson outlines the book's theoretical framework, which draws on information processing theories and political behavior. Her approach method is then discussed in Chapter 2, "The Contours of the Invented State". Thorson empirically identifies prevalent policy misperceptions by conducting qualitative interviews to elicit spontaneous factual assertions about policies, followed by a quantitative survey to measure the prevalence of these misperceptions in a representative sample. Thorson findings reveal widespread misconceptions across various policy domains.

In Chapter 3, "The Policy Gap in the Information Environment", Thorson examines the systematic biases in news reporting that contribute to policy misperceptions through content analysis of media coverage. She identifies the dominance of strategy frames, a bias towards novelty, and the "curse of knowledge" among journalists as dominant factors. These biases result in a dearth of substantive information about existing policies in media coverage. Furthermore, Thorson, in Chapter 4, "The Construction of Beliefs About Policy", explores the cognitive processes underlying policy misperceptions, focusing on inductive reasoning. She investigates why people engage in inductive reasoning about some policies but not others and how this reasoning can lead to misperceptions. This chapter highlights the role of perceived personal relevance in catalyzing this process.

In Chapter 5, "How People Interpret Policy Information", Thorson examines how individuals interpret different types of policy information. Through experimental studies, she demonstrates that policy-outcome information is more susceptible to partisan interpretation

than policy-current information, potentially explaining why corrections of policy-outcome misperceptions often fail to change attitudes. Chapter 6, “Policy Misperceptions and Competence” emphasizes the experimental evidence on the downstream effects of correcting policy misperceptions. Thorson states that providing accurate information about existing policies reduces misperceptions and significantly affects policy approval and priorities across multiple issue areas.

Then, in Chapter 7, “Dismantling the Invented State”, Thorson assesses the effectiveness and durability of corrective interventions for policy misperceptions. She challenges common assumptions about resistance to corrections and public indifference to policy information, showing that policy corrections can be effective and that there is substantial public demand for policy-current information. The closing chapter of the book is more of a reflection question. “What comes next?” Thorson discusses the book’s implications for democratic theory, political communication, and public policy. In addition, this chapter proposes practical recommendations for journalists and researchers to address policy misperceptions and improve public understanding of government policies.

Nevertheless, this work contributes to understanding political knowledge and information processing in democratic maps. Elucidating the nature and impact of policy misperceptions bridges gaps in the existing literature on political misinformation and public opinion formation. The concept of the Invented State provides a valuable framework for future research on the intersection of policy comprehension and political behavior. Moreover, the book has substantial implications for political communication strategies, media practices, and civic education initiatives. As democracies grapple with the challenges of an increasingly complex information environment, addressing the phenomenon of policy misperceptions becomes ever more crucial. This work advances theoretical understanding in political science and communication studies. It offers practical insights for policymakers, journalists, and educators seeking to enhance the quality of democratic discourse and decision-making. Future research should build upon these findings to further explore the dynamics of policy misperceptions and develop effective interventions to promote a more accurately informed citizenry.