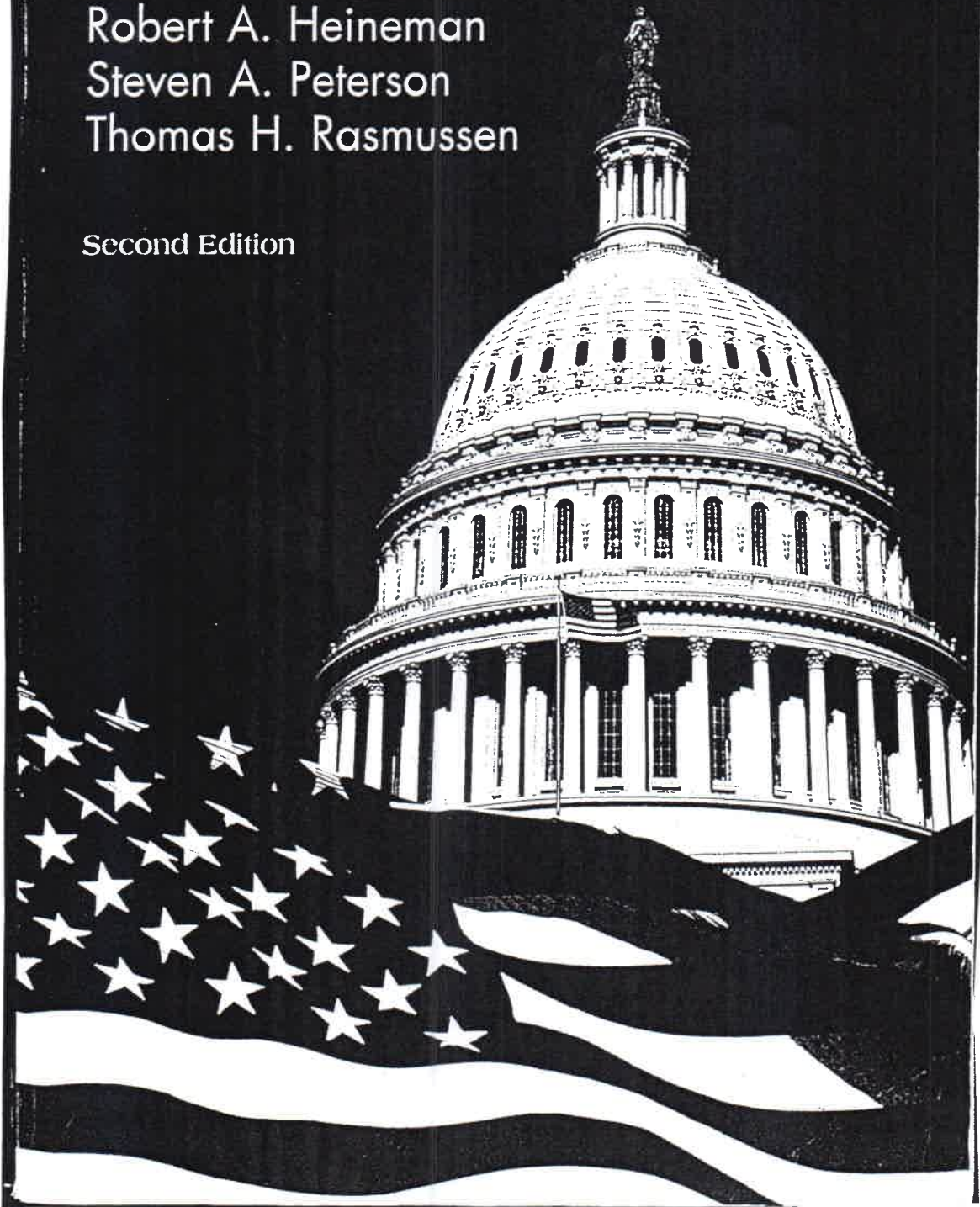


American Government

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Second Edition



The University of Michigan studies are a model of what survey research should look like. They are well structured to ensure the validity of the findings. Key stages involved in such studies are sampling and questionnaire construction.

Sampling

If one is interested in an accurate reading of public opinion at a particular point in time, one must aim for a probability sample. Each individual in the population being studied must have an equal chance of being selected to respond to the questionnaire. One obvious way to do this is to use a random sample. For instance, every person in the population being studied would have his or her name placed in a very large hat. The researcher would then pull names out of the hat, something like televised lottery drawings, producing a simple random sample. In practice, however, other, more sophisticated probability sampling techniques are used when dealing with large populations.

One characteristic of sampling that makes no sense to many people is that a rather small number of interviews can yield a fairly precise estimate of public opinion. If one uses a probability sample, a survey of 1500 people would produce results that are normally accurate 95 percent of the time to within 3 percent of the actual value in the entire population. For example, if 55 percent of a sample of 1500 American citizens said that they planned to vote for a Republican candidate for president, one could infer that this estimate is within 3 percent of the total electorate's actual views—that is, the real figure in the population is between 52 and 58 percent. This is normally as fine-tuned an estimate as one would want. Thus, it would be a waste of money and energy to interview more people.

Questionnaire Construction

Some politicians send mail questionnaires to their constituents. Some of these questionnaires provide extraordinarily good examples of biased wording. An item that reads “Do you think that President Clinton should stand up against the North Korean government over nuclear weapons or should we let them become the dominant power in the region to carry out their evil plans?” is not going to register people's real attitudes about American policy toward North Korea. The question is badly biased. So would be a question that reads “Do you agree with the Democratic party that we should do something about millions of Americans going to bed each night hungry?” In developing a questionnaire, one must ensure that the questions are not slanted and that the wording will be understandable to all. (Some refer to this second principle as

CHAPTER 4

Public Opinion and the Media

Scholars have found it hard to agree on a definition of public opinion. One way of looking at it is this: Public opinion is people's evaluations and understanding of politics in general and their views on specific political issues of the day. This straightforward, if simplistic, definition serves as a useful starting point. This chapter considers methods of studying public opinion, what Americans believe about politics, political participation in the United States, and the role of the media in influencing public opinion.

Studying Public Opinion

How can we find out what American public opinion is? The most common means of studying it is by questionnaire. To put it plainly, if you want to know what people think about politics, you ask them. This is the essential reason for conducting survey research, and students of public opinion have many data sources on which to call. One of the most important is the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center (SRC), whose Center for Political Studies publishes the National Election Studies series. In each presidential election and each midterm congressional election, the SRC carries out interviews with 1500 to 2500 Americans. Results are shared with the larger academic community. These interviews provide a rich source of information on what Americans think about politics.

KISS—"Keep it simple, stupid.") To ask a question like "Are there deleterious consequences of the American policy in Bosnia?" is going to cause problems. Many people simply do not know what the word "deleterious" means.

Public Opinion Polling

Public opinion polling has become important in politics. A public official will sometimes hire a polling consultant to ascertain public opinion on an issue concerning him or her. During elections, candidates often have a pollster on their campaign staff to determine what public opinion is, what voters think of the candidate, and so on. Newspapers and TV network news programs sponsor public opinion surveys to provide news; they report on the results of these surveys to reveal what Americans are thinking.

What Americans Believe: Political Orientations

A word is in order about the basic consensus that exists on political values. The political views of Americans tend to be liberal, in that Americans support private property, self-reliance, free enterprise, freedom, equality of opportunity, achievement motivation, and individualism.¹ Americans take these values for granted and do not seriously question them. Furthermore, this tradition is supported by the poor as well as by the wealthy, by the working class as well as by the upper class. From 1940 to the present, approval of this perspective has remained consistent and high. Donald Devine has remarked that "the liberal tradition has the widespread support necessary for a consensual political culture."² This ultimately enhances the American system's stability, since few people disagree with the values underlying it.

Among the most significant types of political beliefs held by Americans are what are called political orientations, that is, general evaluations of politics. Some of the more important are support for democratic values, trust in government, political efficacy, ideology, political involvement, and postmaterialism. Each of these is considered in the following paragraphs. Another key orientation, party identification, is discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

Democratic Values and Rules of the Game

Americans agree on certain general democratic rules of the game. When asked "Should every citizen have an equal chance to influence government policy?" or "Should the minority be free to criticize majority decisions?" or "Should people in the minority be free to try to win majority support for their

opinions?" Americans overwhelmingly say "Yes." This indicates consensus on general democratic principles. This consensus has remained consistent from the 1950s until now.

In the 1950s, people also were asked if atheists, communists, or blacks should be able to exercise such freedoms. In these instances, consensus broke down, with many Americans saying that such then unpopular groups should not be allowed freedom of speech and other democratic rights. Educated and politically active people were much more tolerant than the mass public.³ In the 1970s and later, survey research revealed that the public had become much more tolerant toward these groups. This suggests that the public has become more supportive of democratic values as applied to specific cases.

This greater tolerance may be an illusion, however, for evidence from a national survey and from a survey in Minneapolis—St. Paul indicates that the level of tolerance has not really changed—only the targets of intolerance. Americans are not as intolerant of blacks, atheists, and communists now as they were in the 1950s, but they have replaced these groups as targets of their intolerance with others (such as homosexuals, radical political groups, and pro-choice or antiabortion groups). Thus people seem as intolerant now; it is just that they are intolerant toward different groups and more tolerant of those focused on in the 1950s.⁴

If the masses are intolerant, how is democracy to be preserved? One common answer is that leaders are the true repository of democratic values, such as tolerance for unpopular groups. However, another important study suggests that leaders may not be so democratic. In the 1950s, state government legislation passed to repress communists in terms of their ability to run for office or their opportunity to be employed by government was much more affected by elite intolerance than by mass intolerance toward communists. This surely indicates that the public should not necessarily be sanguine about the commitment of political leaders to democratic norms.⁵

Ideology

One way of ascertaining ideology is to ask if people are liberal or conservative. While Americans are liberal in the general sense discussed earlier,⁶ they disagree on the proper interpretation of the ideology. To confuse matters, the polar positions in this dispute within a basic liberalism are referred to as "liberals" and "conservatives." In the American context, liberals are more oriented toward social change, government involvement in regulating the economy, and government acting to assist the disadvantaged. Conservatives are more likely to support the status quo and to wish for less government intru-

sion in the economy. Moderates are those who see themselves in the “middle of the road” between the other two.

Recent data indicate that there have not been great sea changes over time in the relative popularity of liberalism versus conservatism on economic issues in the American public, although a modest conservative turn preceded Ronald Reagan’s accession to office and his early years as president. In terms of “life-style” ideology, there has been a consistent liberalizing trend when the last 50 years are considered, although that trend has slowed or stopped within the past decade or so.⁷

Within these broad trends, we find more finely grained oscillations. One study reports that the public experienced more liberal “moods” in the early 1960s (the peak of liberalism in the period from 1956 to 1988), 1968, 1972, and an increasing liberalism beginning in 1986. On the other hand, the public mood became more conservative in 1966, modestly so in 1969, and most conservative in 1980.⁸ The Republican party caught the conservative public mood in 1980, with Reagan’s victory. In 1960, Kennedy mirrored the liberal mood. The difference was that Kennedy was too timid and did not make use of the liberal mood in the public to press for advancement of some of his policy choices, whereas Reagan took full advantage and used his modest electoral mandate to leverage considerable change in a conservative direction. Bill Clinton won the presidency during a liberalizing moment in the public mood, but a cautious Congress and the extant large deficits in the federal budget projected over the ensuing years, coupled with the large and growing national debt, hampered his efforts to ride the liberal wave.

It appears that people born after 1946 tend to be somewhat more liberal than those born earlier. From this position, at least one scholar has argued that there will be a continuing, over-time, slow liberalization among the public, as baby boomers and their children replace earlier generations who are more conservative.⁹ However, the historic pattern of ebbs and flows in the public mood, discussed above, suggests that there will be continuing oscillations in the future (perhaps against a somewhat more liberal base of comparison).

Ideology in terms of liberal versus conservative has real political effects. Liberals are more often Democrats, and conservatives are more often Republicans. Liberals tend to support more liberal candidates for office, and conservatives tend to support more conservative candidates.

What shapes the level of conservatism or liberalism for the public at large? One study discovers that changes in aggregate ideological preferences over time tend to be associated with changes in national economic conditions. Expectations of an improving economy produce greater liberalism in the public

at large, and anticipation of poorer economic tidings goes with more conservative orientations with respect to domestic policy.¹⁰

Trust in Government

During the 1950s, Americans expressed high levels of trust in their government. However, beginning in 1964, that trust began to deteriorate. Throughout the 1970s, the decline continued. This trend apparently began as a result of civil rights laws enacted in the early 1960s. Many whites were unhappy about such laws as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Many blacks at first became more positive about government, as one might predict. However, they too began to report less trust in government shortly thereafter. Presumably, they concluded that no dramatic changes in their lives occurred after passage of these bills and, hence, that their faith in government had been misplaced.

It is likely, then, that dissatisfaction with civil rights legislation triggered the decline in trust. Thereafter, public disagreement over what should be done in Vietnam and the Watergate scandal and “stagflation” all fueled continuing decline.¹¹ Starting in the early 1980s, faith in government began to increase once more, particularly among whites. This appears to have been due to the upbeat mood associated with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. The level of confidence should not be overstated, however. The level of trust is still only about half what it was in the 1950s.¹² If national political tides become more positive, the pool of support ought to rise further. Of course, if major new problems crop up, especially with the economy, one would expect trust to recede further.

Political Efficacy

Political efficacy is an individual’s sense that he or she can influence government and that government will respond to that person. In the 1950s and early 1960s, two-thirds of Americans disagreed with the statement “People like me don’t have any say about what government does.” In 1968, this number dropped significantly, as more Americans felt less influential in politics. The lowered efficacy continued throughout the 1970s and into the 1980s. Watergate and “stagflation”—with the accompanying doubts about leaders’ responsiveness and capabilities—appear to have shaped these responses. In 1984, efficacy had rebounded close to the levels of the 1950s. This signals the greater faith of Americans in their political effectiveness and government’s responsiveness.¹³

Political Involvement

How interested people are in politics and the extent of the information they have about politics indicate political involvement. In the Survey Research Center's National Election Studies, people have been asked from 1960 to the present if they follow government and public affairs. According to this index, interest was generally higher in the 1970s than in the 1960s. This may reflect a heightened interest in general public affairs because of the important issues of the 1970s—Vietnam to Watergate to “stagflation.” Other measures of political interest—caring who wins elections and following campaigns in newspapers—indicate less interest in the 1970s. Lesser interest in elections might result from the sense that problems remained after elections, so a “What’s the use?” feeling could have developed. This is consistent with low trust and efficacy.

A final measure of political interest is how often individuals read newspapers. The General Social Survey, administered to a sample of Americans each year by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) out of Chicago, shows that people’s regular reading of newspapers declined from 1967 to 1988.¹⁴ A part of this, of course, is that Americans have come to use television more and more over this same period. However, in the end, Americans will become less well informed about politics, since television news can transmit only a fraction of the news that newspapers can.

Americans have typically been characterized as not possessing a great amount of political information. High proportions (more than 50 percent) of citizens cannot say what two countries were involved in the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT) talks in 1979, how long a term members of the U.S. House of Representatives serve, who their congressional representative in the House is, or who their two U.S. senators are.¹⁵

Civic Duty

Generally, civic duty is a person’s belief that he or she ought to be involved in politics and vote. The standard way of measuring this belief has been to ask people during interviews whether they agree with statements such as “If a person doesn’t care how an election comes out, then that person shouldn’t vote in it” or “A good many local elections aren’t important enough to bother with.” It is important to be aware of civic duty, since those with a greater sense of responsibility are more apt to vote and participate in other ways in politics. In comparison with other orientations considered in this section, civic duty has remained stable over time.¹⁶

Postmaterialism

Another political orientation is the extent to which one can be considered either materialist or postmaterialist. People growing up in times of scarcity, it is contended, develop materialist attitudes. These individuals are interested in attaining basic survival needs—food, shelter, clothing. As a result, they come to see government as responsible for providing these. On the other hand, those who mature in times of abundance, such as have generally existed in the United States since World War II, take economic and material needs for granted; postmaterialists come to see government as responsible for facilitating self-expression.

Younger people and those who grew up in wealthier homes are more likely to be postmaterialists. Politically, they support women’s rights, antipoverty programs, environmentalism, the antinuclear movement, and life-style freedom. They are also less apt to accept traditional values. Religion may be of little importance in their lives. They tend to accept homosexuality and sexual permissiveness, and they prefer more lenient divorce laws. Materialists are most likely to accept the traditional values.¹⁷ Postmaterialists are slowly closing the gap on the number of materialists—younger people, having grown up in rather good economic times, are more likely to be postmaterialist than their elders. If the economy is healthy over the next decade or so (and there is disagreement about the likelihood of that), an inexorable movement toward postmaterialism will occur, although postmaterialists are now nowhere near a majority—even among the young. If the economy turns sour for a protracted period, postmaterialism is likely to decline.

Economic Decline and Political Behavior: A Bleak Future?

A number of important commentators contend that the American economy is stagnating and may well remain sluggish or even decline over the long run.¹⁸ This is occurring, according to some scholars, as a result of large federal budget deficits, increasing competition for international trade, an end to the formerly healthy annual increases in the real income of families, too great an investment in defense spending over a lengthy period rather than in the domestic economy, and slow strangulation of the economy as special-interest groups influence decision makers to build protection for themselves into the law (thus making the economy less efficient as market principles are undermined). If the future actually becomes as grim as the “gloom and doomers” say, what implications will follow for public opinion and political behavior?

As inflation rises, people become less optimistic about their personal futures and the future of the United States and its economy.¹⁹ Voting based on social class may increase in a faltering economy. M. Stephen Weatherford observes that “there is a tendency for worsening conditions to be associated with higher levels of status polarization, while improved conditions go with lower levels of class voting.”²⁰

A thorough exploration of the effects of individual economic adversity on vote turnout, using 1974 Census Bureau data, shows that self-reported financial decline reduces the odds of a person’s turning out for elections. So too does recent unemployment and being in poverty. Examination of data from 1896 to 1980 indicates that economic problems depress overall turnout rates. Moreover,

Unemployment and other economic adversities are extremely stressful, causing loss of self-esteem, pride, and self-confidence; depression; and other more serious mental disorders.²¹

These consequences collectively lead to diminished turnout. People are more preoccupied with their own problems, and politics takes a backseat. As John Ostheimer and Leonard Rit put it, “When a person experiences economic adversity his scarce resources are spent on holding body and soul together—surviving—not on remote concerns like politics.”²²

Economic traumas have other effects. Accompanying the belief that one’s economic fortunes are sinking are an increased sense of the world as meaningless, political distrust, and less confidence in governmental leadership and basic American institutions. Some speculate that this may have potentially dire effects, leading to a weakening of attitudes supporting democracy. Sustained periods of economic decline, then, might considerably undermine democratic values.²³

Sources of Political Orientations

Political Socialization

Political socialization is the process by which people learn about politics. It is ongoing; basic orientations are subject to change throughout a person’s life cycle—from birth to death.²⁴ Because political learning begins very early in life, much attention has been focused on the agents of socialization for children.

The Agents of Political Socialization for Children

The family is a primary force. In the home, children learn which party their parents identify with and often come to see themselves as being loyal to the same party. The family does not mold children’s views on specific issues, nor does it provide children with a wealth of facts about the American political system. What it does is help to shape children’s general orientations about politics, such as trust and efficacy.

The school fills in factual gaps and adds to children’s political knowledge. Schools also tend to transmit a society’s dominant values to the young. Education has other effects as well. Students who can take part in discussions about politics in the classroom—especially among more affluent students—tend to be more politically efficacious. Extracurricular involvement in high school is tied to greater efficacy and participation.

Media increasingly play a role in political learning; they are dealt with in a later section of this chapter.

Other Factors in Political Socialization

Experiences faced by people in their everyday lives also affect political views—from childhood through adulthood, once more indicating that political socialization is a lifelong process. For instance, becoming a mother—but not becoming a father—tends to reduce the level of political participation in state and national politics, probably simply because the mother must spend so much time parenting that state and national politics take a back seat.²⁵ Being afflicted with poor health appears to reduce extent of political participation.²⁶ Those who are more involved in their place of worship tend to be more conservative in their political views—especially with respect to life-style issues.²⁷

Political generation can be a factor in socialization as well. One study finds that those who were part of the sixties generation (that is, they came of political age in the 1960s) have tended to remain somewhat distinct over time in their political views, for instance, remaining more liberal on life-style issues.²⁸

Demographic Sources of Political Orientations

Individuals’ personal and social characteristics have an effect on what they think about politics. Most basic are education, income and social status, age, and gender.

Education profoundly influences people’s political orientation. People who are more educated are more tolerant and supportive of democratic values, more sophisticated in their political conceptualizations, more politically

efficacious (that is, they feel that they can affect politics and that government officials will listen to them), and more involved in politics. They are also more likely to have a strong sense of civic duty and to have postmaterialist values.

Income and social status affect political orientation in a similar manner. Higher social status is associated with greater ideological sophistication and support for democratic values, trust in government, political efficacy, political involvement, and civic duty. Children from wealthier families tend to be more postmaterialist.

A person's age has some relationship to that person's political perspectives. Older people are more apt to be materialist and more involved in politics. They are also more conservative on some issues, although the relationship is a complex one.

One's gender can affect public opinion. Studies show that women are less efficacious, less cynical about politics, and less involved. To illustrate some gender differences in issue positions, women generally support government assistance for the disadvantaged.

Public Opinion and Policy

People's views on the issues and their ideological preferences are not merely interesting academic subjects. The policies of democratic governments are often influenced by expression of public opinion. There is ample evidence to suggest that public opinion affects judicial decisions,²⁹ congressional roll-call voting,³⁰ and the actions of state governments.³¹

One illustrative study of the courts' responsiveness to public opinion looks at U.S. Supreme Court decisions over a broad period of time. Thomas Marshall gathered national poll results on 110 different issues that could be matched against specific Supreme Court rulings from the 1930s to 1986. He found that 62 percent of the Court's rulings were consistent with majority preference as expressed in public opinion polls.³² Thus, the Supreme Court, often thought of as beyond politics, appears to respond to public opinion. The 62 percent figure is similar to that derived for congressional responsiveness to citizens' views.³³ However, the linkage between public opinion and Supreme Court decisions has apparently been weakened considerably by the unbroken string of conservative appointments beginning with Richard Nixon's presidency—at least up to Clinton's appointment of Ruth Bader Ginsburg in 1993. Because of these appointments, the Court has drifted away from mainstream public opinion in a more conservative direction,³⁴ in that sense losing touch with the public mood.

In a study of responsiveness to public opinion at the state level, Gerald Wright and his colleagues drew on CBS/*New York Times* surveys conducted in all 50 states between 1976 and 1982. These polls included a question asking about the respondents' liberalism or conservatism. The investigators simply created from answers to this question an overall measure of ideology for each state, based upon the responses of individual citizens in those states. The level of liberalism was compared with actual policies enacted by each state and measured in terms of "policy liberalism" (such as greater educational spending per pupil, more concern with consumer protection, easier Medicaid eligibility, and the like). Public opinion was highly correlated with states' actual policies.³⁵

Perhaps the most substantial effort to establish that public opinion affects government decisions is a study by Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro, based on poll results from 1935 to 1979.³⁶ Looking at polling questions asked during this period, the investigators identified issues of the day on which people's views subsequently changed noticeably. The investigators discovered 357 such issues. Additionally, they gathered information on changes in policy by the U.S. Supreme Court, Congress, and state governments. Then they checked to see if government policies changed as public opinion shifted. Overall, there was congruence 66 percent of the time within a year after public opinion was altered. That figure increases to 90 percent correspondence if the time frame is lengthened beyond one year. A number of factors seem to influence the effects of public opinion. For one, the bigger the shift in the public's views, the greater and more rapid is the change in policy. While opinion and policy are congruent for the federal courts and Congress, congruence is even more pronounced in state governments. If public opinion shifts in a more liberal direction, government is more responsive than if the change is conservative.

Thus, public opinion seems to make a difference. However, the question remains: Is public opinion itself manipulated by an elite? This is discussed later in the chapter in the section entitled "The Media and Politics."

Political Participation

Dimensions of Participation

Political participation refers to people's actions that are designed to have some effect on government. Scholars recognize two different species of activity—conventional and unconventional.

Conventional Activity

Actions within this category are what most people think of as participation.

Voting in Elections. This is the most common political activity. In their study carried out in 1967, Sidney Verba and Norman Nie found that 72 percent of people reported voting in the 1960 and 1964 presidential elections (this figure is higher than the turnout really was in those elections because of the well-known tendency of people to overreport their voting turnout).³⁷ This 1967 study serves as a baseline against which to compare more recent information on Americans' political behavior later in this section.

Campaigning. Another type of political action is campaign activity. This includes trying to persuade others to vote for a certain candidate, actively working for a party or candidate, attending political meetings, giving money to a party or candidate, and being a member of a political club. About 29 percent of Americans were so engaged in 1967.

Communal Activity. Twenty-eight percent reported this type of participation, which includes working with others to solve a local problem, membership in a problem-solving community organization, and contacting public officials as part of a group. This is basically action based on cooperation among different people to pursue a common goal.

Contacting. Particularized contacting, carried out by about 14 percent of the citizenry in 1967, occurs when people as individuals contact a political official to try to get him or her to do something to benefit them.

When Americans were surveyed in 1987 to compare their political participation levels with those from the 1967 study, some very interesting changes had occurred. People reported voting less in 1987 than in 1967; they increased their contributions of money to a campaign or cause; they became more aggressive in terms of communal participation.³⁸ It appears as if people came to think that they were better off using their money or group action as a lever to get government to respond rather than depending upon the vote.

Mix of Conventional Participatory Activities

Americans can be categorized in terms of the mix of their participatory acts. Figure 4.1 summarizes these findings from the Verba and Nie study. Inactives are hardly involved, other than occasionally voting. And they are the most numerous type of participant (22 percent). Voting specialists rank second (21 percent); these people vote regularly but do little else. Communalists

are a numerous lot, too (20 percent). These persons engage in communal actions and vote but are largely inactive in campaign activities. Campaigners (15 percent) participate extensively in campaigns and vote; on the other hand, they are inactive in communal behavior. Parochial participants are few in number (4 percent); they are not involved in campaigns or communal affairs, although they do vote regularly. Their participation in politics seems keyed to taking initiative to benefit their own personal lives. The last class consists of complete activists (11 percent). As the term suggests, these are people characterized by their regular involvement in all the conventional activities.

Unconventional Activities

A distinct form of action not covered to this point is participation in such unconventional activities as political demonstrations, protest meetings, violent protest, disobeying laws, and the like. While such behavior is intended to influence officials, it takes place outside normally accepted channels. Verba and Nie, unfortunately, did not examine unconventional behavior. There are no figures to be compared with conventional participation. However, indirect evidence suggests that people in general are less likely to select this behavior

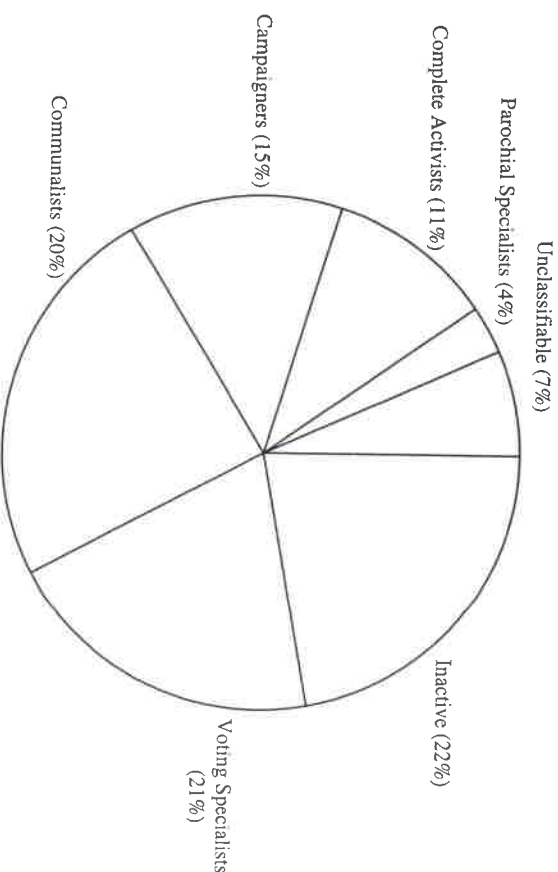


Fig. 4.1 Categories of Political Participation

than they are conventional ones as a way to influence government. Younger people and blacks are more likely to engage in unconventional activity as a tactic than other groups. Over time, unconventional activities appear to have become more acceptable to the general population.³⁹

Who Participates?

Conventional Participation

Both social and political factors increase the odds of people participating in politics.

Social Factors. Those who are higher in social status, with more income, more education, and greater organizational involvement (membership and leadership in nonpolitical groups), are more likely to participate in politics. So too are those who have deeper roots in the community in terms of length of residence. People who have developed a group consciousness (black consciousness, feminist consciousness, or age consciousness, for instance) are more active. Among the least active are the young and the unmarried. In general, men participate more in politics than women do, although in terms of turnout in elections it seems there is now no difference.

Political Factors. Political orientation can shape the likelihood of political activism. Citizens who are interested in politics, who have higher information levels, and who identify with specific political parties are more likely to participate. A sense of political efficacy also goes with participation. An individual with a strong sense of civic duty, the belief that one should be active in politics, is going to participate more. Finally, postmaterialist individuals are more active.

The Socioeconomic Model. One simple way of linking social and political factors together is illustrated in Figure 4.2 This is called the socioeconomic model. The higher in social status a person is, the greater are the odds that he or she will feel more efficacious, be interested in politics, and have a sense of civic duty. These orientations, in turn, push the individual toward participation in politics.

Other factors come into play as well. For instance, among black Americans, living in a city which has a black mayor appears to lead to a sense of “empowerment,” which, in turn, elevates the level of political participation.⁴⁰ And when political leaders (candidates and incumbents and other party officials) emphasize citizen involvement, the people seem to respond by actually



Fig. 4.2 Linking of Social and Political Factors

participating more. Thus, political elites can serve to elevate levels of activism by encouraging the public.⁴¹

Unconventional Participation

Taking part in demonstrations—whether violent or nonviolent—is a typical example of what political scientists label unconventional behavior. People so involved have many of the same characteristics as those who are most active in conventional forms of political behavior. For example, persons likely to be part of a demonstration are the more educated; they are more socially active and more tied into social networks; they are more involved in politics, politically efficacious, and postmaterialistic. Young men are somewhat more prone to take part.

The Effects of Political Participation on Policy

Fundamental to political participation is the conviction that getting involved actually does—or at least can—make a difference. According to Verba and Nie, this is not naive faith; participation, they argue, does affect decision makers—but not always with the result that one might initially expect.

Assume that political leaders wish to know what the public thinks on an issue. Two strategies for accomplishing this are the polling strategy and the participation strategy.

By using the polling strategy, the leader finds out the peoples’ interests through a public opinion interview of a probability sample of citizens within his or her constituency. What the leader obtains is an accurate snapshot of constituents’ views at that particular point in time. By using the participation strategy, the political leader gets an idea of citizens’ wishes by their communications to him or her (whether by vote, letters and telegrams, or talks with individuals or groups). The first strategy, polling, is extremely expensive; thus the second is more likely to be used.

Do these two strategies yield the same interpretations of what public opinion actually is? One way to find out is to compare the distribution of policy preferences of the population as a whole as determined by a survey research questionnaire with that part of the population which participates most in politics.⁴² When people were asked about serious problems which faced them, three areas emerged: welfare, income, and education. On welfare—by which the researchers mean problems in obtaining adequate housing or employment or in paying for medical care—almost a third of the people sampled indicated that they had such a problem. However, if only the most participant respondents were considered, as would be the case if the participation strategy were followed, only a fifth of the respondents thought that they had a welfare problem. This suggests that the intensity of the welfare issue would be underplayed if leaders derived constituency needs from the participation strategy.

On the other hand, a leader attending to participants would most likely find more concern about education than exists in the general population. Thus a distortion occurs:

It would seem that the leader who used the participation strategy would be less sensitive to the existence of severe personal economic problems in the society than would the leader who used the polling strategy. And the more narrowly he limited the population he observed—if he were attuned only to the most active 5 percent of the population, for instance—the more such personal economic problems would be obscured. Participation makes some problems more visible and others less so.⁴³

The next question that must be addressed is the extent to which leaders actually follow the participation strategy. In fact, citizen participation does appear to have some influence on leaders. Overall, the views of leaders tend to be like the view of highly participatory citizens, even when taking into account individuals' social and economic backgrounds. Ultimately, then, the data show that it makes a difference if citizens participate. It also matters who participates. As Verba and Nie conclude:

The fact that the participation input comes from a small and unrepresentative sample makes a difference in how leaders respond. Participation is a powerful mechanism for citizen control, but how that mechanism works depends on who participates.⁴⁴

Indeed, some cities have instituted explicit schemes to build citizen participation into the local decision-making process. An exploration of the impact of such systems in five cities—Birmingham, Dayton, Portland, San

Antonio, and St. Paul—suggests that creation of direct channels of communication between citizens and their local leaders (elected officials plus top bureaucrats) can reduce the bias discovered by Verba and Nie. Surveys of residents, elected officials, and bureaucrats in those five cities suggest that “concurrency” (agreement on the issues of the day between public officials and citizens) is higher in cities with as opposed to those without such participative structures. Thus, conscious efforts to link citizens and their government appear to produce more responsive local governments.⁴⁵

The Media and Politics

People spend vast amounts of time watching television, reading newspapers and newsmagazines, listening to the radio, and seeing movies. The mass media surround them and engulf them each day. For most people, the media provides ears and eyes to the world; they serve as a means of surveillance.

Many books have been written on media and politics. However, an examination of American public opinion without considering the media would be incomplete. This section explores briefly the structure of American media, the impact of the media on public opinion, and how mass media can be used by leaders to affect the views of Americans.

Media Structure

The media that have the most important effects on public opinion are probably television and newspapers. What is sometimes referred to as the “inner ring” of media organizations includes the news departments of the three television networks, CNN, the two wire services (Associated Press and United Press International), and certain major newspapers (the *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post*). Political officials in Washington are very attentive to these media, and many of them play to the media to get publicity for themselves and their policies.

Other media tend to pick up stories from the inner ring. The image of crusading newspapers developing their own stories is somewhat misleading. “Pack journalism” often describes how news is covered, with reporters following one another’s lead in a kind of follow-the-leader game, with the inner ring having the greatest influence. Going along with this is a decline in newspaper competition. Fewer and fewer large cities have competing newspapers, so that citizens have less and less choice about what they will read.

Some theorists who believe that an elite rules the United States have combined these two pieces of information to argue that the media are centralized

in a few hands and that news is shaped by a few media leaders. This opens up the possibility that the elite can shape the messages transmitted by the media to the masses. In this way, the elite can "drainwash" the people into believing that the social and political system is democratic even though, in reality, elitism best describes the system. Of course, many other analysts disagree with this contention.

The Media and Public Opinion

The Media and the Young

In the past, the key agents of political learning for children were seen as the family and the school. The media were not taken into serious account. Now, that neglect has diminished. One reason is the nearly unbelievable amount of time the young spend in front of television sets.

One study looked at the effects of media exposure on 760 fifth and sixth graders in 1973.⁴⁶ The target of this investigation was the effects of "media use" (defined as exposure to news media) on support for political parties, support for elections, political action (wearing a campaign button or talking to people about an election), and political knowledge. The results? Media use by these children produces higher levels of political knowledge, greater support for the electoral process, less support for the political parties (perhaps because of negative portrayals of parties by the news media), and greater political participation. Generally, though, researchers assume that pre-high-school students are not as affected as their elders.

Adolescents seem to be heavily affected by the media. Some evidence indicates that adolescents use the media as a political resource more than they use their own parents or their school. Several different studies speak to the importance of media for adolescents' political learning. For example, heavy media users differ from light users. A 1974 study of 1000 Pennsylvania high-school students categorized 39 percent of the sample as heavy news media users and 22 percent as light users. Heavy users, it turned out, had greater political awareness and were more politically participant.⁴⁷

Watching entertainment programs on television also can affect adolescents' political views. In Providence, Rhode Island, 619 adolescents interviewed in 1980 were found to spend, in the aggregate, quite a bit of time watching television crime shows (for example, *CHIPS*, *Quincy*, *Vega\$*, and *Hart to Hart*). The more a person watched such programming, the less was that person's support for civil liberties. The impact was greater for older respondents. This seems to be a function of the distorted views of crime and the criminal justice system presented in television shows.⁴⁸

The Media as the Bearers of Bad News

Adults, too, are significantly affected by the media. Some scholars have argued that news media in general produce negative views of American politics among citizens. Probably the best-known argument is the contention that television news takes a negative and critical stance toward politics, producing "videomalaise," cynicism, and a lowered sense of efficacy.⁴⁹ This is conceivable because of the kinds of stories network television news tends to emphasize. However, other studies do not indicate that television news (or other sources, for that matter) is particularly negative in its coverage of American politics. It may be that news media, by objective reporting of *real* problems, makes people aware that these problems do exist. Hence consumers of news become more cynical because many governmental efforts to solve problems simply fail. The media act as the bearers of bad news.⁵⁰

Agenda Setting by the Media

Another media impact is agenda setting: the process by which certain issues come to be identified as important and worthy of government action. That there are agenda-setting effects seems well established. For example, in the 1968 presidential election, voters' viewpoint on the important issues of the day seemed to reflect media emphases. Generally, media spotlighting of issues leads to issues being noticed and can, although there are no guarantees, influence people to see these issues as worthy of action.

To illustrate, consider the following rather simple experiment.⁵¹ People were divided into four groups to take part in this study. Each group saw common news items, actually run on the network evening news. In addition, the three experimental groups saw some additional news segments added to this basic package of stories that all people saw. One group watched stories on the simulated evening news which emphasized defense weaknesses; another group saw a newscast with environmental stories replacing defense stories; a third group saw inflation stories instead. The fourth, the control group, saw the basic package of news stories without any additional segments emphasizing a certain issue. Comparisons of viewers' responses on questionnaires before and after seeing the sequences over a four-day period indicated that those who saw the defense and environmental stories came to rank these as more important over the time span studied; this represents an agenda-setting effect.

The Priming Effect

Related to this is the so-called priming effect, in which greater media emphasis on an issue leads members of the public to take what they have

learned from this coverage and use it in another context. For example, during Reagan's presidency, widespread media coverage of the Iran-contra affair led people to use this information to evaluate the president's performance. The impact was more pronounced among those with less political information to begin with.⁵²

Leaders' Use of Media

Elites use the media to advance their interests. Presidents, for example, often work to make media coverage more positive by trying to win the favor of reporters, shaping the flow of news from the executive agencies to emphasize good publicity and "hide" bad news, devising attractive photo opportunities, and arranging work schedules to produce better odds for favorable media coverage. The White House has an elaborate communications organization, which suggests the perceived importance of the media for a president. Presidents can shape media coverage through news releases, briefing, back-grounds, appearances by top spokespersons on news programs (such as *Meet the Press*), so-called leaks, news conferences, and televised broadcast speeches. The latter two call for somewhat more attention.

If one looks at presidential news conferences from the 1920s through the 1970s, certain patterns emerge. With the advent of television, news conferences have become less frequent and less regular, perhaps because any mistake made will be witnessed immediately by a large number of citizens. Potential damage is greater and damage control more difficult. When problems arise, presidential news conferences become more irregular. There is avoidance behavior, particularly on foreign policy matters.⁵³ Conferences are used less, then, when problems for the president are most likely to be highlighted.

A cataloging of major broadcast presidential speeches from 1949 to 1980 also produces evidence of presidential use of the media in the interest of the administration. Such addresses are most likely to occur with significant shifts in presidential popularity. If popularity goes up, it seems that presidents try to boost it further; if it declines, addresses seem to be designed to stop the sag. Positive events (taking credit) and negative events (damage control or, in foreign affairs, "rallying around the flag") also increase the odds of an address. Major addresses are less likely with increases in unemployment or inflation or if military activity increases. More to the point, such strategies may have some impact.

Lyn Ragsdale observes that "the occurrence of a presidential speech has a significant positive effect on levels of presidents' public support."⁵⁴ On av-

erage, a major broadcast speech produces a 3 percent boost in popularity. Thus, presidents may be able to manipulate their popularity ratings via the media. When a president's popularity is high (50 percent or greater approval), his rhetoric can influence Americans' views on major policy issues of the day. In this way, a president can exercise real leadership over public opinion. On the other hand, less popular presidents seem unable to mobilize support for their policy preferences.⁵⁵

Congress also uses the media—especially for the benefit of its individual members. Extensive in-house media facilities are available for members of the House of Representatives. For instance, recording studios are available for use by incumbents. Members take advantage of this as well as of their franking privileges to build links with the folks back home. Many suggest that such facilities have contributed considerably to incumbents' success rates in elections.

Democratic theorists can find comfort in several observations in research: the citizenry believes itself politically capable and has greater faith in the political system now than it had during the 1970s; Americans' sense of civic duty remains rather high; and public opinion seems to have a real impact on public policy, just as political participation does.

Elitists might counter by pointing out that political leaders can use the media to influence, perhaps to manipulate, public opinion. Further, the more educated and the wealthier are more participant in politics and hence are more likely to influence decision makers. Thus, the linkage between citizens and their representatives is strongest for the "haves."

Pluralists would argue that different groups with their respective interests must be taken into account by leaders. As Chapter 5 indicates, the political parties try to build coalitions of group support. As a result, the myriad groups in society will have their voices represented through their political parties.

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