The Evolution of Political Knowledge

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The charge given me here is to review the intellectual history of the study of mass politics in the United States, to deal with the major puzzles and debates that have marked the field, and to identify important avenues for research in the coming years—all in fifty pages or so. It’s an impossible assignment. Cutting corners, I’ve been stringent in my choice of examples, ignored some productive lines of inquiry entirely, and imagined my responsibilities begin where V. O. Key’s left off, with the 1961 publication of his magnificent *Public Opinion and American Democracy*.

Key completed his book during a year he spent as a visiting scholar at the Survey Research Center at Michigan.¹ For empirical illustrations, he drew upon the first few national election studies, and for conceptual and theoretical guidance, upon the writings and opinions of a small number of specialists: Campbell, Converse, Gurin, Miller, and Stokes in Ann Arbor, along with Cantril, Hyman, Lazarsfeld, Kornhauser, Lipset, the Sherifs, Stouffer, and a very few others stationed elsewhere. The scholarly world that Key moved in and summarized so brilliantly was much smaller than the world we know today.

The main problem today, for anyone so foolish as to attempt a rewrite of *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, is to avoid being swept away by the avalanche of research. The trick is to keep on one’s feet while attempting to determine which parts of the massive and relentless flow of scholarship should be singled out for review. Knowing that my selections are likely to please no one completely, here I take up a train of topics—the problem of ignorance, the question of competence, the foundations of public opinion, the power of communication, the scope and meaning of political action, the mystery of elections, and the nature of political representation—that all contribute mightily to the subject of mass politics. I begin with the individual citizen and end, more or less, with the mass public considered as a whole.

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³ Pale Democracy: Opinion and Action in Postwar America

DONALD R. KINDER

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Awash in Ignorance

For critics of democracy, the claim that citizens don’t know enough has been a powerful and persistent weapon. Those opposed to the spread of democratic ideology and practice at the time of the American founding argued that “while the common citizen might be expected to be a fair judge of matters close to his or her ken, such as how a minister’s pay was best raised or how much repair must be done on the local bridge, good information about national and international affairs was exactly what most citizens, preoccupied by their daily subsistence rounds, conspicuously lacked” (Converse 1990, 369). Today’s society is by comparison more affluent, better educated, and flooded with information, and yet the question persists: When it comes to politics, do Americans know enough to participate sensibly in matters of government?

Walter Lippmann’s answer was a resounding “No.” In Public Opinion (1922/1965), Lippmann argued that the trials and tribulations of daily life are compelling in a way that politics can rarely be. To expect ordinary people to become absorbed in the affairs of state would be to demand of them an appetite for political knowledge quite peculiar, if not actually pathological. Lippmann presented his argument without benefit of systematic evidence, but we now know that he was right (e.g., Campbell, Converse, and Rodgers 1976). “Politics,” as Dahl (1961b, 305) once put it, “is a sideshow in the great circus of life.”

And if politics is a sideshow, citizens may well wonder why they should take the trouble to become informed about it. Or, as Anthony Downs argued famously in An Economic Theory of Democracy (1957), rational voters will pay the costs attached to the procurement and analysis of political information (measured in time, energy, and opportunities foregone) only insofar as the information promises a return. But in a large society, one person’s vote is “lost in a sea of votes,” and so the instrumental benefits from an enlightened vote are infinitesimal. The result, according to Downs, is “rational ignorance.”

Rational as it may be, the level of ignorance demonstrated by modern mass publics on matters that elites take for granted can nevertheless be pretty startling. After more than forty years of continuous Democratic control, for example, only 59 percent of Americans knew in the fall of 1992 that the Democratic Party held the majority of seats in the House. In late 1995, more than twice as many Americans believed that the federal government spends more money on foreign aid than on Medicare than the reverse. And on and on (Converse 1975; Delli Carpini and Keeler 1996). Moreover, despite dramatic upgradings in education, Americans are no better informed today than they were when Key was completing Public Opinion and American Democracy (Bennett 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). And about the dramatic events and commanding personalities that animate international politics, Americans know considerably less
than do their counterparts in Great Britain, Canada, France, Germany, Italy, and Spain (Dimock and Popkin 1995).

Such results are not exactly inspiring, but perhaps they are not as democratically disheartening as they first appear. One reason for this is supplied by Milton Lodge and his Stony Brook colleagues, who argue in effect that citizens know more than they can tell. Drawing on a model of cognition developed by Hastie and Park (1986), Lodge (1995) sets out an account of how citizens alter their views of candidates as a campaign unfolds, which runs like this: when citizens come across new information, they extract its political meaning, update their summary evaluations of the rival candidates accordingly, and store these altered evaluations in long-term memory, meanwhile forgetting the details that prompted the updating in the first place. The implication of this “on-line model” of information processing is that we should judge citizens not by the information they can recall, but by the kinds of information they entertain, and how ably they integrate such information into their ongoing political evaluations.

Perhaps. No doubt Key would have admired Lodge’s argument, as I do, for its theoretical felicity and its methodological sophistication. But suppose voters were perfectly responsive to information in just the way that Lodge suggests (so far the evidence comes from a few experiments: e.g., Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995). Then voters’ preferences would be fully informed, it’s true, but voters themselves would have nothing to say. Processing campaign information on-line, discarding the reasons for their preferences, voters could do little more than announce their decisions. They could not argue or debate, and they would be incapable of justifying their positions, to others or even to themselves. Because democracy is, at least in part, “government by discussion” (e.g., Fishkin 1991), the on-line model, even if it supplied the whole story of how citizens respond to new information, would not eliminate the problem of ignorance in a democratic society.

There is a second reason, though, why we should perhaps not despair over how little ordinary citizens know about political life. Ill-informed citizens might still make sensible choices if they are able to take cues from well-informed sources. Citizens may not know much, but they may know enough. A terrific demonstration of this point is provided by Lupia (1994), who showed that California voters who knew little about the details of various complicated proposals to reform the automobile insurance industry in their state nevertheless made choices that were indistinguishable from those made by well-informed voters. All the generally ill-informed voters needed to know was which proposals were backed by which interest groups. When Californians knew, for example, that the insurance industry itself was behind a particular proposal, they knew enough to vote against it. More generally, by taking cues from those who are well-informed (e.g., Brody 1991; Huckfeldt and Sprague 1995; Katz and Lazarsfeld
common citizens can “be knowledgeable in their reasoning about political choices without necessarily possessing a large body of knowledge about politics” (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991, 19).

Empirical demonstrations of cue-taking are one thing; a theory of cue-taking is another. In The Democratic Dilemma, Lupia and McCubbins (1998) make it their business to provide one: that is, to specify the conditions under which busy citizens, preoccupied for the most part with family, home, and work, unwilling to undertake exhaustive (and irrational) informational searches about matters of politics, can nevertheless reach sensible choices. In their account, cue-taking turns out to be a solution to the democratic dilemma essentially when sources know things that citizens do not (expertise) and when sources are motivated to tell the truth (trustworthiness), either because the source and the citizen share interests in common or because external forces enforce trustworthiness. In developing their theory, Lupia and McCubbins draw primarily upon work in economics on incomplete information, signaling, and strategic communication, but their major conclusions bear a strong resemblance to empirical findings elsewhere: the overriding importance of source credibility in studies of persuasion (e.g., McGuire 1969; Miller and Krosnick 2000), and the repeated imperative that public officials and political candidates display both competence and integrity if they are to win and hold the public’s favor (e.g., Kinder 1986; Miller and Shanks 1996).

Research on cue-taking is flourishing, and it should, but it is unlikely, in the end, to provide a completely satisfying solution to the problem of ignorance. The problem is not just that citizens don’t know enough, or that they cannot tell others what they know. It is that they know things, or think they know things, that are incorrect: that the crime rate is rising (when in fact it is declining), or that a huge fraction of the national treasury is being spent on foreign aid (when it is not). Such misunderstandings can be consequential. When they are corrected, when citizens are supplied with what we used to call “the truth,” they may change their opinions quite spectacularly, as Gilens (2001) has recently demonstrated, and as Converse (1975) warned some years ago.

Furthermore, neither the claim that citizens know more than they can tell nor the assertion that under certain conditions poorly informed citizens can mimic the decisions made by the better-informed has anything to say, really, to the brute fact of information inequality (Converse 1990, 2000). Some Americans know hardly anything; many know a little; and a few, the activists who live and breathe politics, seem to know practically everything. It would be surprising if inequalities of information on this scale—Converse referred to them as “staggering” and “astronomical”—were politically innocuous, and they are not. The well-informed are more likely to express opinions, possess stable opinions, use ideological concepts correctly, make use of facts in political discussions, process
information sensitively, retain news of the day, vote consistently with their political interests, and take an active part in politics (e.g., Bartels 1988; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Iyengar 1990; Mondak 2001; Price and Zaller 1993; Zaller 1990, 1992). Information matters.

The Question of Competence

The problem with turning over political power to ordinary people runs deeper than mere ignorance, some say. The deeper problem is that common citizens, even when adequately informed on public matters, do not reason well enough to earn a voice in the decisions of government. In *The Phantom Public*, Lippmann compared the average person who wants to be a virtuous citizen to a fat man who aspires to become a ballet dancer (Lippmann 1925, 39). Schumpeter (1942) argued against democracy on the grounds that the typical citizen “drops down to a lower level of mental performance as soon as he enters the political field. He argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests” (Schumpeter 1942, 262).

For the most part, arguments such as these were advanced without proof (to use another old-fashioned word). Schumpeter was right to say that in deciding whether the preconditions for democracy are met requires “laborious appraisal of a maze of conflicting evidence” (Schumpeter 1942, 254)—but he did not undertake such an analysis himself. To be fair, in Schumpeter’s time, there was not all that much evidence to analyze. Which brings us to Philip Converse and his celebrated, or notorious, but certainly influential, analysis of belief systems in mass publics, published in 1964.

Innocent of Ideology

Analyzing national surveys carried out in 1956, 1958, and 1960, Converse concluded that qualitative and perhaps unbridgeable differences separated the political thinking of elites from the political thinking of ordinary Americans, and that, indeed, most Americans were ill-prepared and perhaps incapable of following—much less actually participating in—what might be called democratic discussion.

It didn’t take long for Converse’s message to provoke a huge commotion. The most compelling line of criticism (or so it seemed at the time) was that Converse had paid too little attention to the nature of campaigns. Under this view, the sophistication of citizens’ understanding of politics mirrors the sophistication of the debate they are presented. Provide Americans with a more thoughtful and philosophical politics, so ran the argument, and they would respond in kind. Surely Converse’s conclusions reflected in part the comparatively tranquil Eisenhower
years, a period of political recovery from the intense ideological debates of the New Deal and from the collective trauma of depression and war. Surely the original claim must be modified given the events that have shattered national tranquility since.

Not really, not as I see it (Kinder 1983, 1998). Converse’s original claim of ideological naiveté stands up quite well, both to detailed reanalysis and to political change. Indeed, in some respects, the claim is strengthened. Despite the boisterous events and ideological debates that have sporadically punctuated American politics over the last nearly forty years, most citizens remain ideologically innocent: indifferent to standard ideological concepts and lacking a consistent outlook on matters of public policy.

Not everyone agrees, of course. Over the years, Converse’s most able and persistent critic has been Robert Lane (1962). Lane pushes for a broader conception of ideology, that ideology includes the topical matters that Converse analyzed but much more besides: “ideas on fair play and due process, rights of others, sharing of power, the proper distribution of goods in society (equality), uses and abuses of authority” (Lane 1962, 15). Based on intensive interviews with a small number of working-class men, Lane concluded that common citizens have heartfelt ideas on such political topics as these, and so might be thought of as amateurishly ideological.

Does this make trouble for Converse’s claim of ideological innocence? Not too much. Lane seeks to explicate everyday notions of equality, freedom, and democracy, while Converse (and most of the work that has followed in his wake) probes the structure of thinking about parties and candidates and especially policy. Converse is interested in the possibility that elites and ordinary citizens might speak intelligibly to one another, and so he naturally focuses on topical aspects of politics on which citizens are occasionally asked to render a judgment. Lane’s interest in personality and private experience leads him away from the details of contemporary politics to deeper and arguably darker matters. Put this way, the two sets of results are complementary, not contradictory.

When Converse and Lane are writing on the same subject, moreover, they come to very much the same conclusion. Lane looked for evidence of contextual thinking in political reasoning—thinking that places events and issues in topical, temporal, and historical perspective—but he didn’t find much. Instead, the men Lane interviewed “morselized” politics:

This treatment of an instance in isolation happens time and again and on matters close to home: a union demand is a single incident, not part of a more general labor-management conflict; a purchase on the installment plan is a specific debt, not part of a budgetary pattern—either one’s own or society’s. The items and fragments of life remain itemized and fragmented (Lane 1962, 353).
If, in the end, Lane’s findings do more to reinforce the conclusion of ideological innocence than damage it, Dawson’s (2001) analysis of ideology among African Americans might appear to make more trouble. Dawson’s conception of ideology resembles Lane’s much more closely than it does Converse’s (though his empirical method shares much in common with Converse). Dawson argues that a set of persistent arrangements—segregation, discrimination, indigenous and somewhat autonomous institutions (schools, churches, newspapers)—produce the conditions that give rise to a family of oppositional ideologies among African Americans. This is a fascinating argument, attentive to historical change and structural variation in a way that studies of public opinion rarely are, but the evidence on the extent to which notions like black nationalism or disillusioned liberalism, articulated by black leaders and activists, actually constitute controlling ideologies among ordinary black citizens is, so far at least, unpersuasive.³

Nonattitudes and Issue Frames

Acknowledging that Americans are for the most part innocent of ideology, might they still be able to develop well-grounded and sensible views on particular issues of public dispute? This possibility arose in a different form in the last section, running on the idea that ill-informed citizens might take cues from well-informed and trustworthy sources and so end up with opinions that reflect their interests and values quite faithfullly. Here we encounter another reason for skepticism directed at this outcome, this time expressed in terms of the nonattitude thesis, perhaps the most devastating element in Converse’s argument. Converse found opinions on policy to wobble back and forth over time, as though random. Taking the question of whether the government should leave things like electrical power and housing to the market as a limiting empirical case, Converse divided the public into two groups: the first made up of citizens who possessed genuine opinions and held onto them tenaciously; the second and, as it turned out, much larger group, composed of citizens who were quite indifferent to the issue and when pressed, either confessed their ignorance outright, or out of embarrassment or misplaced civic obligation, invented an attitude on the spot—not a real attitude, but a “nonattitude” (Converse 1970). If Converse is right here, then sizable fractions of the public “do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time” (Converse 1964, 245). When it comes to politics, people simply don’t know what they want. “Democratic theory,” as Achen (1975, 1227) put it, “loses its starting point.”

As I read the evidence and arguments that Converse’s claim set off, the case for nonattitudes seems stronger now than ever (Achen 1975; Converse 2000; Erickson 1979; Feldman 1989; Hill and Kriesi 2001; for more details than you
might care to know, see Kinder 1983, 1998). Most decisive, perhaps, are the new findings showing that political elites hold onto their political beliefs much more resolutely than do common citizens. For example, delegates to the Democratic and Republican national conventions are “deeply committed, highly motivated, and keenly involved partisans” (422), and their views on policy are roughly two or three times more stable than are the views of the general public (Jennings 1992). The same point is made by Putnam, Leonardo, and Nanetti (1999) in a panel study of Italian regional councilors, and by Converse and Pierce (1986) in their analysis of the French electorate and candidates for the National Assembly, in a panel survey that bracketed the disorders of the spring of 1968. These results suggest that nonattitudes primarily reflect the low information and casual attention that common citizens ordinarily bring to politics.

Does this mean that people who express nonattitudes have nothing to say? No, at least not according to Zaller (1992), who argues that nonattitudes reflect not so much ignorance as confusion. Citizens do not know what they think about political topics, because they cannot adjudicate among the various competing considerations that spring to mind (Alvarez and Brehm 1995, 1997, 1998). From this point of view, nonattitudes are real, in that they are systematic manifestations of things that citizens care about (Chong 1993; Zaller and Feldman 1992). Still, if nonattitudes are real, but not deeply considered, and real, but subject to short-term reversals, it is not clear whether Zaller’s interpretation should be thought any brighter for democratic prospects than where Converse left things in 1964.

Perhaps a bit, and here’s why. If Americans have lots of things in mind out of which they might construct opinions, then they might actually succeed in doing so should they receive helpful guidance from others on how politics should be defined and understood. Insofar as elites provide useful frames (e.g., Gamson and Modigliani 1987), citizens should be more likely to develop real opinions. And, in fact, they seem to. In a series of experiments across a variety of issues, when provided helpful frames, citizens are more likely to express an opinion, and such opinions are more stable over time and better anchored in the material interests and political commitments that the frames appear to highlight (e.g., Kinder and Sanders 1996).

**Enough Already about Ideology: Alternative Explanations for Public Opinion**

The great debate over ideology, a major preoccupation of public opinion studies for more than a generation, taught us more about how Americans do not think about politics than about how they do. Conceding that ideological abstractions lie beyond what most Americans can or care to manage, and that on any particular
matter of political contention not everyone will have a genuine opinion, how can we explain the real opinions that citizens do express?

**Self-Interest**

Perhaps citizens are first and foremost seekers of self-interest. That is, in forming opinions on political matters, citizens fix their attention on what’s in it for them, supporting parties and policies that seem likely to advance their own material interests. This simple claim has of course a long and distinguished history: Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, Adam Smith, James Madison, on up through Truman, Downs, and Dahl can be counted as endorsing the notion of self-interest as a primary motive for politics. But is it so? Is public opinion in fact reducible to what David Hume once called the “universal passion” for personal advantage?

No, it is not. Defined in various sensible ways, self-interest turns out to be surprisingly unimportant when it comes to predicting public opinion (e.g., Sears, Lau, Tyler, and Allen 1980; Green and Cowden 1992; Kinder and Sanders 1996). On such diverse matters as racial busing for the purpose of school desegregation, antidrinking ordinances, unemployment benefits, mandatory college examinations, military intervention, affirmative action, bilingual education, immigration, health care, government aid to education, gun control and more, the effects of self-interest are usually puny if not entirely undetectable. Under the right circumstances—when the material benefits or harms of a proposed policy are substantial, imminent, and well publicized—self-interest can make a difference (Sears and Citrin 1982). But because these circumstances don’t come along very often, self-interest usually does not take us very far in understanding public opinion. Having reviewed the literature, Citrin and Green (1990) conclude, as I do, that the evidence is “devastating for the claim that self-interest, defined narrowly as the pursuit of immediate material benefits, is the central motive underlying American public opinion” (Citrin and Green 1990, 16).

Self-interest does appear to play a visible role in political action, however. Parents of school age children are more likely to take an active part in the affairs of the local school board (Jennings 1979), just as white parents of school age children are more likely to participate in antibusing organizations (Green and Cowden 1992). These cases are interesting not least because in each instance self-interest and opinion are unconnected. Self-interest predicts not where people stand on school-board policy or busing, but rather whether they act on their views, whatever their views might be. Perhaps this disjunction between opinion and action has to do with the appreciably higher costs of action, which “cause people to become more attentive to the potential benefits of their decisions” (Citrin and Green 1990, 21).
Social Identity

In any case, citizens propelled entirely by calculations of self-interest would be, in Sen’s (1978, 336) memorable phrase, “social morons.” Here I assume that citizens are deeply social, and that their political opinions are, at least in part, “badges of social membership,” “declarations, to others and to ourselves, of social identity” (Smith, Bruner, and White 1956).

If, as Lane (1973) argues, social identity entails “a sense of group placement, of allies, of ‘people like me,’” in contrast to strangers and enemies,” there are good reasons to suppose that people are predisposed to partition the social space in just this way. In a series of remarkable experiments, Henri Tajfel (1982; Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament 1971) demonstrated that when people are separated on utterly innocuous grounds, favoritism toward the ingroup and gratuitous discrimination toward the outgroup always follow. Ingroup members are rewarded more, liked more, their efforts are evaluated more favorably, they are praised more for good deeds and blamed less for bad, and their virtues are remembered while their liabilities are forgotten. Yet in these experiments, ingroup affiliation is entirely casual—indeed, in the limiting case it is random. Group membership is anonymous. Conflicts of interest between groups are deliberately and explicitly removed. Self-interest is bracketed as well, since participants allocate rewards only to others. Groups are created and temporary, so there is no history of hostility to mobilize, and no shadow of the future to intrude upon allocations of rewards. And yet, in this artificial social system, ingroup favoritism always emerges, in scores of experiments conducted among Bristol schoolboys, soldiers in the West German army, Maori children in New Zealand, trade-school students in Geneva, undergraduates in New York City, and more (Brewer and Kramer 1985; Davidio and Gaertner 1993; Messick and Mackie 1989).

Establishing that people possess a built-in readiness to carve the world up into ingroups and outgroups leaves open the question of which particular lines of demarcation are drawn, and especially which ingroup-outgroup divisions are enlisted for political purposes. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) argue that the answer lies in history, that it was the rise of the nation state and the revolution of industrialization that together set in motion processes of social differentiation that led eventually to forms of political conflict we now find familiar. If Lipset and Rokkan were mistaken in their particular conviction that industrialization would lead inevitably to the primacy of social class, they were surely correct to point to differentiation of social life as a fundamental source of political conflict.

We now know quite a bit about political difference organized in this way, including, for example, the emergence and meaning of a “gender gap” in public opinion (Kaufman and Petrocik 1999; Manza and Brooks 1998); the occasionally sharp political differences associated with religious affiliation (Leege and Kelstadt 1998).
1993); place (Black and Black 1987; Key 1949; Fischer 1975; Oliver 2000); generation (Mannheim 1928; Schuman and Scott 1989); class (Alford 1963, 1967; Hout, Brooks, and Manza 1995; Lipset 1959/1988); and race (M. Jackman 1994; Kinder and Winter 2001).

If “objective” membership, by itself, is sometimes sufficient to account for differences in opinion, the political consequences of group membership are typically accentuated among those who belong to the group in some more fundamental fashion: who identify with their group for reasons of shared interests or common values (Conover 1988; Price 1989), or who feel interdependent with their group (Dawson 1994; Tate 1993); or, going still further, who are in possession of group consciousness (Conover and Sapiro 1993; Gurin, Hatchett, and Jackson 1989).

Group identification takes time and effort to build, but its relevance to the world of politics can change practically overnight. A fine case in point is provided by the 1960 presidential campaign, when John Kennedy’s Catholicism converted the Democrat’s long-standing advantage among Catholics into a landslide. Kennedy did much better among Catholic voters in 1960 than did his Democratic predecessors, and he did especially well among devout Catholics, those strongly identified with their religious group. This is a vivid illustration of group identification at work, one made instantaneously (but quite temporarily) relevant by the nomination of Kennedy. And there’s more: at the same time Kennedy was winning votes from Catholics, he was losing support among Protestants. Kennedy’s losses were particularly steep among those Protestants closely identified with their faith, who were “remarkably preoccupied by the fact that Kennedy was a Catholic,” and, in the main, upset at the prospect that a Catholic might become president (Converse 1966b, 112). Thus the 1960 contest illustrates both sides of social identity: ingroup pride and outgroup hostility.

The religious bigotry that Kennedy provoked is a powerful reminder that, as reference group theory insists, people “frequently orient themselves to groups other than their own” (Merton and Rossi 1950, 35). It suggests, as well, that public opinion might be “group-centric.” That is, perhaps Americans organize their opinions around visible social groupings, simplifying complex questions of public policy by turning them into judgments on the moral qualifications of the groups that such policies seem to benefit or harm, much as Converse (1964) first suggested some forty years ago. The evidence available to Converse at the time was fragmentary; now it seems overwhelming. Public opinion is indeed shaped in powerful ways by the feelings citizens harbor toward the social groups that are somehow visibly entangled in the stories and issues of the moment (e.g., Bartels 1992a; Citrin, Reingold, and Green 1990; Gilens 1999; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Pettigrew and Mertens 1995; Price and Hsu 1992; Sears, Hensler and Speer 1979).
Principles

To Alexis de Tocqueville, it was “singular stability of certain principles” that defined the essence of American political life. The American people were in constant motion, but the American political mind, Tocqueville thought, remained fixed, committed to a few key ideas. It has taken a good long while, but we have finally caught up to Tocqueville’s intuition: a considerable and gathering tide of scholarship now aims to show that public opinion is in important respects rooted in principles.

Recent scholarship nominates three guiding principles above others: individualism, which embraces individual initiative and hard work as exemplary virtues and treats idleness and dependence on others as moral defects; equality, which encompasses both equality of opportunity and equality of result, equality in politics and in economy, equality as an aspiration for how the world should be and equality as an assessment of how the world is; and limited government, the perhaps distinctively American idea that government be restricted in scope and constrained in practice, and that treats the interventions of government into society and the economy as ineffective, perverse, or immoral.

If these three principles do not exhaust the possibilities, they nevertheless seem to be sensible choices, on several grounds. First, each has received detailed attention in studies of the American political tradition (e.g., Hofstadter 1948; Lipset 1963; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Myrdal 1944; Pole 1993 [1978]; Smith 1997; Verba and Orren 1985). Each has, from time to time, played a prominent role in national debates. Each is neither so general as to be vacuous nor so specific as to be of no use in guiding citizens on the topics that arise in politics (Barry 1990). And each of the three provokes genuine disagreement. Not every American gives highest priority to hard work and individual initiative, not all Americans respond to the call of equality, and not every American regards government as the enemy. This means that differences on these general matters of principle might actually translate into corresponding differences on particular matters of politics.

And so it seems to be. Consistent with Tocqueville’s intuition, opinion on matters of politics appears to be, in part, a reflection of differences over more general matters: over the sanctity of work and effort, over the value of equality, and over the proper size and scope of government (e.g., Feldman 1988; Zaller and Feldman 1992; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Winter 2001; Markus 2001; Henry, Kosterman, and Sears 2000; Sniderman, Brody, and Kuklinski 1984).

This summary breezes over more than one difficulty. First, because principles are in fact a complicated bundle of ideas, disagreements over meaning and measurement are common. Second, although principles are typically presented as though they were fixed and unchanging—and treated that way by assumption
in empirical analysis—surely they are responsive, in part, to ongoing political struggles and conflicts (e.g., Foner 1998). Third, the imprint that principles leave on opinion is not uniformly strong; contingent effects are the rule. And fourth and finally, if principles are consequential—at least some principles, for some issues, on some occasions—how is it that citizens who are demonstrably unwilling or incapable of developing ideological points of view are somehow or another quite willing and capable of acquiring and deploying principles?

In sum, public opinion has complex roots: ideological conviction (for the political upper crust), material interests (a bit), political principles (some), and social identity (a lot). My parting point here is that how large a role each plays depends in part on how politics is framed. Public opinion depends not only on what citizens bring to politics—their ideology and interests and principles and identity—but on what politics brings to them, which, roughly speaking, is my next topic.

Communication and Opinion

Over the latter half of the twentieth century, mass communications have transformed the landscape of American politics, vastly increasing the information about public affairs available to ordinary citizens. Today we are virtually bombarded with news and propaganda about public affairs: inundated with suggestions about how issues should be understood; instructed on which problems are worth our attention; informed as to how our institutions and officials are performing; and told when our opinions are sensible and when they should be altered. With what effect?

Not much, was Joseph Klapper’s (1960) famous and surprising answer. In The Effects of Mass Communication, Klapper presented a careful and thorough review of the available findings. Sifting through the evidence, Klapper concluded that “mass communication functions far more frequently as an agent of reinforcement than as an agent of change” (Klapper 1960, 15). Taking up essentially the same subject Klapper did, I come to a different conclusion.

Attention

In nations the size and complexity of the United States, the command and control of public attention is accomplished—if it is accomplished at all—primarily through mass communication. Conceivably at stake in this process is influence of three kinds. Mass communication could influence how citizens make sense of politics (what I will call framing); how citizens decide what is important in politics (agenda-setting); and how citizens evaluate the alternatives that politics puts before them (priming).
Framing

How do Americans go about making sense of what Walter Lippmann (1925, 24) once called the “swarming confusion of problems” that animate public life, and what role does communication play in this process? Lippmann understood that a good answer to this question should begin by recognizing that in modern society, ordinary citizens must rely on others for their news of national and world affairs. Such reports inevitably privilege particular points of view. Reporters and editors, but also presidents, members of Congress, corporate publicists, activists, and policy analysts are all engaged in a more or less continuous conversation over the meaning of current events.

In one common vocabulary, this conversation takes place through an exchange of “frames.” Frames, it is said, “make the world beyond direct experience look natural” (Gitlin 1980, 6); they supply “a central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events, weaving a connection among them” (Gamson and Modigliani 1987, 143). Frames include both the rhetorical tools fashioned by political elites to advance their ideas and the often unarticulated rules of selection, emphasis, and presentation governing the work of journalism.

Frames take on significance because politics is complex. The issues taken up by government and the events that animate political life are subject to alternative interpretation; they can always be read in more than one way. Moreover, by defining what the issue is and suggesting how to think about it, frames imply what, if anything, should be done. Elites spend as much time and money as they do crafting and disseminating frames on the assumption that this work shapes how the public sees politics and therefore influences what the public is prepared to support. Is this assumption correct?

So it seems. Earlier I referred to experimental research demonstrating that citizens provided with helpful frames are more likely to form real opinions than are those from whom such assistance is withheld. Other studies pit one kind of frame against another. Because alternative frames highlight different features of an issue, they should alter the relative weight given to the interests, group sentiments, and political values that potentially go into making up an opinion—and so they do (e.g., Capella and Jamieson 1997; Jacoby 2000; Kinder and Sanders 1990; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Price 1989). In this respect, frames are like recipes, advice from experts on how citizens should cook up their opinions (Kinder and Sanders 1996).

Nearly all of the evidence on framing comes from experiments—not a bad thing entirely. Indeed, experiments in general have real advantages (Kinder and Palfrey 1993), and these framing experiments in particular have some very desirable features. Most mimic actual elite debates and everyday journalistic conventions, and
many are inserted into representative sample surveys, and so the ritualistic complaint about experiments—that they exploit convenient but unrepresentative populations—does not really apply.

Nevertheless, experimental results can always be questioned on their generalizability, and framing effects are no exception. The major worry in this respect is that framing experiments, like experiments in mass communication generally, typically erase the distinction between the supply of information, on the one hand, and its consumption, on the other. That is, experiments are normally carried out in such a way that virtually everyone in the audience is hand-delivered the message. The typical experiment thereby avoids a major obstacle standing in the way of communication effects: namely, an inattentive audience, lost in the affairs of private life. By ensuring that frames reach their intended audiences, experiments may exaggerate their power. A more balanced reading of frame effects requires methodological diversification, experiments and studies oriented to the world outside.

A second problem is that while the experimental literature I’ve just reviewed makes a good case that frames can affect how (and even whether) people evaluate various matters of politics, it actually skips over the focal concern I began with: namely, how people make sense of these matters in the first place. In all the studies of frames and framing, understanding itself is never directly addressed or measured. This is unfortunate, since democratic institutions often presume that ordinary citizens understand the matters that come before them. It is actually doubly unfortunate, because over the past decade, cognitive psychology has been developing conceptual and methodological tools well suited to analyzing the problem of political sense making. Here I have especially in mind Pennington and Hastie’s analysis of jurors transforming the jumble of evidence presented to them during a trial into a compelling narrative (Pennington and Hastie 1992, 1993) and Holyoak and Thagard’s (1995) account of reasoning by analogy.

Agenda-Setting

Among the most important decisions in any society are those that determine which issues become part of politics (Bachrach and Baratz 1970). In Schattschneider’s crisp formulation, “Some issues are organized into politics while others are organized out” (1960, 71). The public is somehow implicated in this process: citizens develop ideas about what is, and what is not, important, which problems are, and which are not, proper subjects for government action, and these ideas, in turn, shape and constrain what government attempts to do (Verba and Nie 1972; Burstein 1985). How does the public come to believe that crime is an urgent problem and that acid rain is not?
More than fifty years ago, Lazarsfeld and Merton suggested that the answer to such a question might lie with mass media, as they “confer status on public issues, persons, organizations, and social movements” (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948, 101). Lazarsfeld and Merton thought that mere attention was enough, that “. . . enhanced status accrues to those who merely receive attention in the media, quite apart from any editorial support. . . . Recognition by the press or radio or magazines or newsreels testifies that one has arrived, that one is important enough to have been singled out from the large anonymous masses, that one’s behavior and opinions are significant enough to require public notice” (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948, 101–2).

Good idea—but an idea only. Lazarsfeld and Merton offered no evidence for their conjecture, and a dozen years later, neither could Klapper. Agenda-setting’s first and rather oblique brush with evidence did not come until Cohen’s (1963) perceptive analysis of newspapers and U.S. foreign policy. Based on interviews with journalists and government officials, Cohen concluded, famously, that the press “may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think about” (Cohen 1963, 13).

Cohen had in mind policy experts and the attentive public, however, so his strong conclusion doesn’t necessarily speak to agenda-setting among the general public, what Riker once called the “misty swamp” (Riker 1993, 2) of everyday politics. But now, forty years later, it seems that Cohen’s conclusion does apply: that news media are in fact “stunningly successful” in determining what Americans think about (see, e.g., Behr and Iyengar 1985; Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller 1980; Funkhouser 1973; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Neuman 1990). Rising prices, unemployment, energy shortages, arms control: all these (and more) become high priority issues for the public after they first become high priority for newspapers and networks. For a wide variety of problems, the American public’s concern for political problems closely and rapidly tracks changes over time in the attention paid them by national media.

In Lazarsfeld and Merton’s (1948) original formulation, agenda-setting should apply not only to issues and problems but to persons as well. A splendid venue for examining this process is provided by the contemporary American presidential nomination system, which features multiple challengers competing in a sequence of closely bunched contests. Under this system, an unexpectedly strong showing can bring a barrage of media attention. Picked out of the crowd of presidential hopefuls, a lucky candidate can become, almost overnight, a serious contender, as Gary Hart showed in 1984, and as John McCain demonstrated again in 2000. What most voters learn in such circumstances, at least in the short run, has rather little to do with the candidate’s policy proposals or personal background.
or general philosophy. The lesson is more rudimentary: it is that this candidate has arrived, that this candidate is to be taken seriously. Showered with attention, such candidates are handed an opportunity to make their case (Bartels 1988).

**Priming**

Every now and again Americans are called upon to evaluate alternatives put before them by their political system: they decide whether to support or reject a candidate; they find policy proposals wise or terrible; they take the consequences of government action to be successful or disastrous; they judge their president’s performance in office to be inspiring or deplorable; and so on. These various alternatives that citizens are asked to evaluate are inevitably complex, and such complexity makes it difficult in any particular case to know what standards should be applied. The intuition behind priming is that these standards are supplied or at least encouraged by the preoccupations of mass communications. How political alternatives are evaluated depends in part on which stories news media choose to cover and, consequently, which standards are made salient. The more attention news pays to a particular aspect of political life —the more frequently that aspect is primed—the more people will incorporate what they know about it into their political evaluations.

Defined this way, priming has received strong and consistent support in a series of television news experiments (Iyengar and Kinder 1987). After primed by stories that focus on national defense, for example, viewers judge the president largely by how well he has provided, as they see it, for the nation’s defense; after primed by stories about inflation, viewers evaluate the president by how he has managed, in their view, to keep prices down; and so on. Priming shows up across a variety of problems, for Democratic and Republican presidents alike, for good news as well as bad, for opinion and for choice, and at the peak of campaigns as in the quieter moments in between.

These results and the various experiments that followed (e.g., Gross 2001; Iyengar 1991; Miller and Krosnick 2000; Valentino 1999; Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002) demonstrate priming effects under controlled conditions, but not whether priming is important in the world of politics. For that we need evidence of another kind, “natural experiments” that take analytic advantage of sudden shifts in the news stream. Priming shows up in these circumstances as well. For example, following revelations in November of 1986 that funds from secret arm sales to Iran were being illegally channeled to the Nicaraguan Contras, the public’s evaluations of President Reagan suddenly became preoccupied with matters of foreign policy (Krosnick and Kinder 1990; for other demonstrations of priming based on “natural experiments,” see Bartels 1993; Krosnick and Brannon 1993; Mendelberg 2001; Mutz 1992; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Stoker 1993).
As defined here, priming is provoked by mere attention. But of course news does more than simply draw attention to some problems while ignoring others: it also frames problems in particular ways. Especially important in this respect is the extent to which problems are framed in such a way as to suggest that they have political causes or political remedies. Priming effects are augmented when television news coverage implies that the president is responsible either for causing a problem or for failing to solve it, and diminished when coverage implies that a problem’s causes and remedies are to be found elsewhere (Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Iyengar 1991).

Given the empirical support for priming, we might expect that political campaigns would be organized with priming at least partly in mind. And so they seem to be. Here we are moving from inadvertent to deliberate priming; from priming as an unintentional consequence of news organizations trying to tell good stories and attract large audiences to priming as an intentional effect of campaigns trying to build political support. Petrocik (1996), for one, places priming at the very center of campaigns. In Petrocik’s vocabulary, candidates and parties attempt to make elections be about issues they “own.” Ownership is rooted in history, a reflection of each party’s long-term pattern of “attention, initiative, and innovation” toward particular problems and certain constituencies. When a party owns an issue, voters are inclined to believe that the party and its candidates are more sincerely committed to doing something about it. Following this logic out, rival candidates should “argue along lines that play to the issue strength of their party, and sidestep their opponent’s issue assets” (Petrocik 1996, 829). It turns out that in recent presidential campaigns, both Democratic and Republican candidates do in fact emphasize issues they own: Democrats talk about education and health care, Republicans talk about defense and tax cuts. More generally, campaigns are not so much debates over a common set of issues as they are struggles to define what the election is about. Campaigns are, as Riker once put it, “mostly about salience, not confrontation” (Riker 1993, 4; Budge 1993; Gelman and King 1993; Jacobs and Shapiro 1994, 2000).

**Persuasion**

Political persuasion entails the supply of arguments and evidence through which people are induced to change their mind about some aspect of politics: that in light of new information, the president is smarter than he first seemed, or that school desegregation is ineffective and should be abandoned, or that more effort and money must now be invested in national defense. And on the question of what role mass communication plays in this process, Klapper’s answer of course was not to worry: mass communications seldom persuade, minimal effects are the rule. Klapper says this, and so do Hovland (1959), McGuire (2001), and one
V. O. Key (1961). Meanwhile, Zaller (1996) insists that the right answer to the question of persuasion is not minimal effects, but, to paraphrase lightly, massive effects, all the time. The truth, as I will try to show, lies somewhere in between.

Klapper was influenced heavily by The People’s Choice, the landmark examination of the 1940 presidential contest in Erie County, Ohio, carried out by a team headed by Paul Lazarsfeld (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948). To their surprise, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet discovered that relatively few voters altered their intentions over the course of the year. Indeed, by the time of the summer conventions, before the formal campaign even began, roughly 80 percent of voters had become permanently committed to one candidate or the other. From spring to fall, only a handful of voters—some 5 percent—actually changed sides. What little change that did occur, moreover, apparently had less to do with the campaign than with the personal influence of family and friends. Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet concluded that presidential campaigns are generally ineffective at persuasion. Rather than converting voters from one side to the other, presidential campaigns reinforce the early deciders and activate the latent predispositions of the initially uncommitted.7

Klapper took these results seriously, and he was wise to do so, for they have stood up very well. Despite dramatic changes over the last half-century in politics and society, American presidential campaigns still fail as exercises in political persuasion. We know this from panel studies patterned after the original Lazarsfeld design (e.g., Bartels 1993; Finkel 1993; Markus 1982; Patterson 1980), and from aggregate forecasting models that accurately predict the outcome of American presidential elections from information available before the campaign gets underway, including the razor-thin result in 2000 (e.g., Rosenstone 1983; Bartels and Zaller 2001; Gelman and King 1993). Klapper was right about presidential campaigns: not much persuasion, mostly reinforcement and activation.

Conceding this point—that little persuasion takes place from Labor Day to Election Day—should not, however, lead us to conclude that presidential campaigns are therefore dispensable. To the contrary, activation and reinforcement are vital political processes, as Lazarsfeld and his colleagues knew. Campaigns activate voters by arousing their interest and providing them information, thereby allowing them to choose wisely—or in any case, more wisely than they would have in the absence of a campaign (Bartels 1988; Gelman and King 1993; Johnston, Blais, Brady, and Crete 1992; Miller and Shanks 1996). And campaigns reinforce voters by providing good reasons for their choices, reminding them why they are Democrats or Republicans, thereby keeping partisans in line and defections to a minimum (Bartels 1993; Katz and Feldman 1962; Sears and Chaffee 1979).

Nor should we conclude that because presidential campaigns rarely succeed in persuading significant numbers of voters to switch from one side to the other,
other kinds of campaigns will fare no better. One clear example to the contrary comes from the systematic study of House campaigns. A principal result there is the importance of money: the more cash challengers raise, the stronger the campaign they can mount, and the better they do come Election Day (e.g., Jacobson 1980; Green and Krasno 1988; Erickson and Palfrey 2000). A second case is provided by the sequence of primaries and open caucuses through which American presidential candidates are now selected, splendidly analyzed by Bartels in *Presidential Primaries and the Dynamics of Public Choice* (1988).

Acknowledging the importance of activation and reinforcement, and the likelihood of some persuasion in lesser races, the main and arresting lesson of more than a half-century of empirical research on presidential campaigns is failure. Why is this so? Why are presidential campaigns so ineffective at persuasion? One answer is that the campaign mounted by one side is “neutralized” by the campaign mounted by the other (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1948; Bartels 1992b; Gelman and King 1993). Under current arrangements—electoral competition dominated by two well-established parties and presidential campaigns funded primarily by public sources—both sides assemble roughly equally capable teams, of roughly equal experience and intelligence, who set about spending roughly the same (large) amount of money in roughly the same ways. Whatever persuasive effect is accomplished by the one is offset by the other.

Another is that presidential campaigns run up against the most basic and enduring of the voters’ political predispositions: party identification. For many strong partisans, the details brought forward by any particular campaign are largely beside the point—or rather the details testify to their side’s superiority (Bartels 1993; Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1966a; on the decline and revival of strong partisanship in the American electorate, see Bartels 2000). 6

Finally, if strong partisans are essentially unmovable because they are so deeply committed, other potential voters are difficult to persuade because they’re not paying attention. In the midst of analyzing the flood of political propaganda unleashed by the 1940 presidential campaign, Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet (1948, 121) noticed that far from being drowned in information, most voters “did not even get their feet wet.” Lazarsfeld and his associates were referring to presidential campaigns, but their point is a very general one. “Perhaps the principal incontestable moral of the data about politics and mass communications,” V. O. Key once wrote, “is that many of the political messages carried by the communications networks do not reach many people. The limits of the audience fix the area of direct influence of the mass media: a message unheard is a message unheeded” (Key 1961, 345).

All this said, political persuasion is not impossible. Two general paths to persuasion remain open. The first—low-information persuasion—we’ve met before. The central claim here is that generally uninterested citizens might still be
susceptible to persuasion when elite sources supply simple and decisive cues. Simple, so that the cue can be easily communicated, and decisive, so that the cue can make a difference, as illustrated by Lupia’s (1994) analysis of California voters blissfully ignorant of the details surrounding various complicated proposals to reform automobile insurance industry, paying attention instead to well-publicized interest group endorsements. To employ the terminology supplied by Petty and Cacioppo’s (1986) elaboration likelihood model of attitude change, Lupia is tracing out a peripheral route to persuasion. When ordinary citizens take simple cues from well-informed sources, they are subject to low information persuasion.

The second opening is persuasion over the long haul. An excellent case in point is supplied by Page and Shapiro (1992), who find that when American public opinion on matters of policy has changed, “it has not done so wildly or capriciously or randomly; it has generally shifted in comprehensible ways, in response to new information and changing conditions” (Page and Shapiro 1992, 321). The changing conditions that Page and Shapiro have in mind are for the most part historic events—World War II, riots that raced through American cities in the 1960s, the skyrocketing inflation of the late 1970s, Chernobyl—and the new information they say moves opinion comes notably from presidents, commentators, and experts, supplied to the general public through mass communication.

Page and Shapiro’s result turns out to be quite representative of the empirical returns from a wide range of recent inquiry into the dynamics of public opinion (e.g., Fan 1988; Hibbs, Rivers, and Vasilatos 1982; Kellstadt 2000; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erickson 1999 [1991]). In these various investigations, public opinion in the aggregate seems quite responsive to social, economic, and political change, indeed sometimes exquisitely so. The role of the media in these dynamics is not always explicit, but it is always at least implied. In short, if we ask not about the short-term but the longer haul, and not about individuals but about the public as a whole, then persuasion seems to be the rule, not the exception.

How can this be? How, especially, can this result be reconciled with the supposedly imposing obstacle to persuasion posed by the low exposure and low interest of the average citizen? One answer is that the engine of opinion change pointed to in these studies is history in capital letters—not humdrum politics, but historic turning points like World War II or the civil rights movement, which are exceptional in the attention they command and the interest they arouse.

A second answer is that the movement in collective opinion that these studies uncover may be due primarily to change among the most attentive members of the public. In aggregating to the public as a whole, the random error contributed by individual ignorance, indifference, and confusion may be canceled out (though not always and never completely; see, for example, Althaus 1998; Bar-
tels 1996; Berinsky 1999). Given sufficient number of cases, clear signals can emerge from even a “sea of noise” (Converse 1990, 382). The implication here is that the systematic and sensible movement of public opinion in the aggregate may be determined disproportionately by a mere handful of citizens who are paying close attention (Converse 1990; Stimson 1999).

In short, neutralization, partisan resistance, and indifference are formidable but not insuperable obstacles to persuasion. If Klapper was right to say that presidential campaigns in particular seldom persuade, we seem nevertheless to have come quite far from “minimal effects.”

Zaller (1996) wants to take us farther still, arguing that the correct conclusion is massive persuasion, most all the time. We’ve failed to see this, Zaller says, for three reasons. First, we have measured exposure to mass communication poorly (here echoing Bartels’s 1993 complaint). Second, we have looked for evidence of opinion change where there is no change in mass communication content. And third (the heart of the matter), we have failed to model persuasion properly. In particular, Zaller contends that standard assessments of persuasion overlook the crucial fact that citizens are often exposed to countervailing messages, and so are pushed simultaneously in opposite directions. What appear in standard analysis to be minimal effects are actually, in Zaller’s telling, massive but offsetting effects.

Trying to do better, Zaller begins by drawing on the same set of psychological ideas that inform much recent research on communications generally. Zaller presumes that people arrive at their opinions by averaging across the considerations that happen to be accessible at the moment. Accessibility, in turn, depends upon memory retrieval that is probabilistic and incomplete. Considerations that have been “in thought” recently are more likely to be sampled. To make this model of opinion come alive for understanding political persuasion, Zaller (1992) introduces two additional assumptions, building on insights offered by Hovland (1959); Hovland, Lumsdaine, and Sheffield (1949), Converse (1962), and McGuire (1968). The first is that people will be more likely to receive a communication as a direct function of their level of general information about politics, where reception involves both exposure to and comprehension of the given communication. Second, people will resist communications that are inconsistent with their political predispositions only in so far as they possess sufficient information to detect such inconsistency. Zaller’s model recognizes that citizens differ sharply from one another in their partisan and ideological predispositions, and that they differ enormously from one another in the care and attention they invest in politics.

So specified, Zaller’s model can account for a variety of empirical cases: the electoral advantages enjoyed by Congressional incumbents, shifts in American opinion on school desegregation, changes in American opinion on the Vietnam
War, among others (Zaller 1989, 1991, 1992). In all these instances, public opinion appears to move in response to alterations in the elite supply of information. The story is complicated because it takes into account differences in the motivation and skill that citizens bring to politics, and because it recognizes that overall shifts in public opinion typically conceal underlying combinations of changes that move in opposite and partially offsetting directions.

Action

“In a political system where nearly every adult may vote but where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually governs?” So Dahl (1961b, 1) began his famous meditation on politics and power in New Haven. Here I take up a prior question: In a political system where knowledge, wealth, social position, access to officials, and other resources are unequally distributed, who actually participates?

To begin to answer this question it is useful to recognize that participation normally takes well-defined and established forms—in Tilly’s (1978, 1986, 1993) formulation, a repertoire:

Any population has a limited repertoire of collective action: alternative means of acting together on shared interests. In our time, for example, most people know how to participate in an electoral campaign, join or form a special-interest association, organize a letter-writing drive, demonstrate, strike, hold a meeting, and build an influence network. These varieties of action constitute a repertoire in something like the theatrical or musical sense of the word; but the repertoire in question resembles that of the commedia dell’arte or jazz more than that of a strictly classical ensemble: people know the general rules of performance more or less well and vary the performance to meet the purpose at hand. (Tilly 1986, 390)

The repertoire familiar to us today differs notably from its nineteenth-century predecessor, which was parochial in scope and heavily dependent on patrons. Grain seizures, invasions of forbidden fields and forests, attacks on machines, sacking of private houses, and turnouts were once the established forms of contention. With the development of capitalism and the rise of the nation-state, however, “the interests and organizations of ordinary people shifted away from local affairs and powerful patrons to national affairs and major concentrations of power and capital” (Tilly 1986, 395). A new repertoire began to take shape. No longer so parochial in scope, forms of contention were now often addressed to national authorities. No longer so dependent on patrons, collective action was now autonomous and versatile. In place of the grain seizure and the turnout came the demonstration, the strike, the social movement, and the election campaign.
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That these various forms of contention are all included in the same repertoire does not mean that they are all drawn upon equally. On the contrary: some forms of political action—voting for president—are common, while others—boycotting a local business—are rare. Indeed, once beyond voting, political activity falls off steeply (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Taking the evidence all around, the average American, one could say, is a citizen without politics. As was true for interest and information, we now find to be true for action as well. In the great circus of life, politics is but a sideshow (Dahl 1961b, 305). Averages of course can conceal enormous variation, and that would seem to be the case here. Small numbers of Americans do a lot, larger numbers do nothing, while the rest do one thing or another, depending on timing and circumstance. There is, in short, enormous variation in American participation—and the question, taken up next, is why?

Resources and the Price of Participation

Participation in politics is costly. It eats up time and sometimes money; it requires a variety of skills; it is encouraged by confidence that taking part will be worthwhile. So if the question is who participates in politics, a good (if partial) answer would seem to be: those who can pay the costs. And indeed, political action comes most from those citizens who command ample resources: plenty of time, lots of money, well trained in the skills required for political action, brimming with confidence that their efforts will pay off (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Tilly 1978; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Some resources matter more than others: roughly speaking, skills matter the most, and confidence and time the least. This is very roughly speaking, since different resources come into play for different elements of the participation repertoire. Thus family income has a huge effect on the likelihood that Americans will donate money to a political cause, but figures much less importantly in other kinds of political activities. Thus mastery of English discriminates sharply between Americans who do and don’t send off letters to Congress, but is irrelevant for predicting who shows up at community meetings. Thus, as a final example, free time seems to influence not whether Americans take part in politics, but rather the hours they are prepared to contribute should they decide to take part in such labor-intensive activities as working on a campaign or serving on a local community board (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Schlozman, Burns, and Verba 1994; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

One practical implication of the claim that participation is costly and prospective participants count costs has to do with registration requirements and turnout. In order to vote, Americans first must register. And registration, as Wolfinger and Rosenstone (1980) point out, “is usually more difficult than voting,
often involving more obscure information and a longer journey at a less convenient time, to complete a more complicated procedure” (61). Within the United States, registration procedures vary widely (though less now than they did prior to the Voting Rights Acts of 1965 and 1970), and such variation accounts for a substantial share of differences in turnout from one jurisdiction to the next (Kelley, Ayers, and Bowen 1967; Nagler 1991; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). U.S. voter registration requirements are comparatively onerous, which is why turnout rates in America trail so far behind voting in Europe, where parties and governments are much more likely to bear the costs of registration (Jackman 1987; Powell 1986; Wolfinger, Glass, and Squire 1990).

Under current arrangements, probably the most important resources citizens bring to politics are “civic skills”: communication, organization, and intellectual abilities that render political action less costly. Citizens who speak and write well, who know how to organize others, and who possess the cognitive abilities for reasoning effectively about complex and abstract matters are more likely, as a consequence, to take an active part in politics (Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Leighley 1991; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Given that these skills matter so much, how do they arise? One obvious and primary source is education (Junn, Nie, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Civic skills also flow from adult involvements in the various institutions that comprise civil society: work, religion, and voluntary organizations (Almond and Verba 1963; Nie, Powell, and Prewitt 1969; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Wald 1992). Burns, Schlozman, and Verba (2001) analyze differences between men and women in participation from this point of view. Such differences are due, they find, not to the ways that resources are converted into action, for resources work in much the same way for men as for women, but rather to the greater resources that men gradually accumulate at work and in voluntary organizations, resources that make the world of politics more interesting and less costly to enter.

That involvement in civic society makes a difference to political participation lends importance to Putnam’s (1995a, 2000) recent and instantly famous claim that civic engagement in the United States is collapsing. Taking a page from Tocqueville, Putnam argues that associations “instill in their members habits of cooperation, solidarity, and public-spiritedness” (Putnam 1993, 90). Democracy, Putnam proposes, depends on civic engagement, and in the United States, Putnam concludes, civic engagement is in perilous decline. Membership in the PTA and the Elks Club and bowling leagues, informal socializing and visiting, church attendance, and more are all down. “By virtually every conceivable measure,” Putnam concludes, “social capital has eroded steadily and sometimes dramatically, over the past two generations” (Putnam 2000, 287).

And why are Americans bowling alone? After sifting through the evidence
and ruling out a variety of possible explanations, Putnam settles on two primary and related factors. First, Putnam discovers a substantial divide in civic engagement between those Americans born before and after 1930. Starting with the 1930s cohort, each succeeding generation has participated less and less in collective life. The second has to do with the profound transformation of American social life brought about by television. In 1950 barely 10 percent of American homes owned television sets; by the close of the decade, 90 percent did, an astonishing change. Americans now watch an average of three to four hours of television each day, and the more they watch, the less they participate in civic associations (Putnam 2000). Putnam concludes that if the evidence is not quite sufficient to convict television for the crime of declining civic engagement in America, “the defense has a lot of explaining to do” (Putnam 1995b, 680).

Putnam’s thesis has created a huge stir, and naturally not everyone is convinced that he is right. Critics challenge whether civic engagement has actually declined or if it has, whether such a decline might not represent a return to normal conditions. They point out that the kind of overnight slide in civic engagement that Putnam claims to find in America is inconceivable from the perspective he set out in Making Democracy Work (1993), where variations in present-day Italian civic society are so stable that they evidently can be traced back to the early Middle Ages. The critics suggest that not all civic associations enhance democracy: the Ku Klux Klan and the Michigan Militia are civic associations, too, but not the sort Putnam has in mind. They argue, finally, that Putnam’s theory of participation leaves out politics and society, neglecting the ways in which political and civic institutions mobilize citizens into political life (e.g., Ladd 1999; Schadson 1998; Skocpol 1996, 1999; Valelly 1996).

**Participation and Mobilization**

From the perspective of elites, participation is a resource. That is, public officials and political organizations try to use participation for political advantage, targeting and timing their efforts for maximum effect. To enhance their chances of winning an election, or passing a bill, or modifying a ruling, or influencing a policy, officials and organizations attempt to mobilize the public: they sponsor meetings and rallies, circulate petitions, request contributions, instruct citizens about the issues at stake and how and when to act, drive voters to the polls, supply citizens with arguments with which to bombard their representatives, and more (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

One extensively researched case of mobilization is the party canvass. During a typical national campaign, representatives of the Democratic and Republican parties contact roughly one of every four potential voters, talking to them about the candidates and the coming election (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).
suggests that they are wise to do so. Field experiments demonstrate that party contact enhances turnout, especially when the contact takes place face-to-face (e.g., Eldersveld 1956; Gosnell 1927; Gerber and Green 2000). Aggregate statistical analysis finds that districts with relatively elaborate, well financed, and active party organizations have high voting rates (e.g., Katz and Eldersveld 1961). And surveys reveal that people who report that a party representative has contacted them during the campaign are more likely to vote (and more likely as well to try to persuade others, to work for a campaign, and to donate money to a candidate or cause: Kramer 1970; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993).

Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995) speculate that the party canvass succeeds through “cascading mobilization.” Party contacts set in motion processes of social diffusion and informal persuasion through the neighborhood, leading ultimately to greater participation. This conjecture suggests a larger point: that the mobilization of political participation often takes advantage of the social organization of everyday life (Tilly 1978). Mobilizing through “preexisting social networks lowers the social transaction costs of mounting demonstrations, and holds participants together even after the enthusiasm of the peak of confrontation is over. In human terms, this is what makes possible the transformation of episodic collective action into social movements” (Tarrow 1994, 22; for empirical examples, see Gould 1991; McAdam 1986; McAdam and Paulsen 1993; Morris 1984).

The results on party mobilization suggest an explanation for the puzzling decline in American turnout over the latter half of the twentieth century (McDonald and Popkin 2001). The decline is puzzling because it coincides with alterations in social structure and registration procedure that together should have substantially increased participation. Over this period, the proportion of Americans having successfully completed a high school diploma almost doubled. In the meantime, the Twenty-fourth Amendment eliminated the poll tax while the Voting Rights Act of 1965 suspended literacy tests. All other things equal, turnout should have increased.

That turnout fell may have to do in part with the transformations that have come to political campaigns. Where mobilization once relied upon face-to-face contact between prospective voters and party activists (Gosnell 1937; Wolfinger 1974), mobilization belongs now to “professional campaign consultants, direct mail vendors, and commercial phone banks” (Gerber and Green 2000, 653). As the political parties substituted telephone calls and direct mailings for personal canvassing, more and more potential voters have remained home (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Gerber and Green 2000).

While candidates and parties have been spending less of their resources on personal canvassing, they have been spending more on mass communications, especially television. And as campaigns are waged increasingly over the airwaves, they are turning more and more negative. So at least is the contention of
Ansolabehere and Iyengar. In the television age, they say, campaigns have become “hostile and ugly. More often than not, candidates criticize, discredit, or belittle their opponents rather than promoting their own ideas and programs” (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino 1994). This development is not just unseemly, again according to Ansolabehere and Iyengar, but is real trouble for the American political system. For negative campaigns are demobilizing: they sour citizens on politics and drive them away from the polls. Ansolabehere and Iyengar reach this conclusion based principally on a series of well-crafted experiments in which negative advertisements are embedded within actual campaigns. They find essentially the same result—negative campaigns turn voters off—when they examine voting rates in Senate elections that vary in campaign negativity, and when they analyze turnout among Americans questioned in a pair of National Election Study surveys, some of whom were witness to negative advertisements and some of whom were not (Ansolabehere, Iyengar, Simon, and Valentino 1994; Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1995; Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Simon 1999).

This is an impressive line of research, but it seems to me that settled conclusions on the effects of negative campaigns are not yet possible. Negative campaigns do not always lead to demobilization (Lau, Sigelman, Heldman, and Babbitt 1999), and some forms of negative advertising, by clarifying that important differences separate the candidates, may actually enhance turnout (Kahn and Kenney 1999; West 1993). Nor, finally, is it obvious that recent campaigns are all that negative (Jamieson 1992; West 1993). To Herbert Hoover, the New Deal was “Fascism,” “despotism,” and “the poisoning of Americanism” (Sundquist 1983, 301). Bryce characterized American campaigns of the late nineteenth century as “thick with charges, defences, recriminations, till the voter knows not what to believe” (1888/1995, 879, quoted in Lau et al. 1999, 851). And going back still further, Riker (1997) found plenty of negative campaigning over ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

**Participation and Action Frames**

This brings us to frames, or I should say, back to frames. We’ve made use of frames before, as a way to describe how elites formulate issues, thereby influencing how citizens come to their opinions. In parallel fashion, frames may influence how—and especially whether—citizens choose to take part in politics. The basic argument here is that collective action draws “on the trust and cooperation that are generated among participants by shared understandings; or, to use a broader category, on the collective action frames that justify, dignify, and animate collective action” (Tarrow 1994, 22).

The meaning of frames in this sense is perhaps illustrated best in Gamson and Modigliani, *Talking Politics* (1992). There, Gamson reports the results of a set
of focused discussions with ordinary Americans on a series of pressing public problems. Gamson is especially interested in the development of a kind of consciousness or mentality that would support participation in social movements. And for the source of such consciousness, Gamson looks to social movements themselves, which are always in the business of promoting frames that inspire and legitimate their activities. Gamson distinguishes among three aspects of frames. First is the injustice component: collective action frames express moral indignation at some harm. Second, collective action frames attempt to induce a sense of agency: change is possible; harm can be rectified. Collective action frames seek, as Gamson put it, to “empower people by defining them as potential agents of their own history” (1992, 7). And third is a sense of identity. Frames define both a “we” and a “they”; the we who together can accomplish something noble; the they who stand in the way. Gamson says that of the three aspects of frames, injustice is the most central. Given injustice, citizens are inclined to define the issue in adversarial terms and to believe that working together they can prevail.

Do frames really do this work? One might expect to find such demonstrations in the literature on social movements. To explain the emergence and occasional successes of social movements, researchers (by now a bit of a movement themselves) point to various contributing conditions: precipitating grievances, material resources, political constraints and opportunities, preexisting organizational structures (e.g., Tilly 1978; McAdam 1982; Tarrow 1994; McCarthy and Zald 1977), and, increasingly in recent years, compelling frames (e.g., Snow and Benford 1992; McAdam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). But while there now exists considerable evidence that movement leaders spend a fair amount of their time formulating frames and strategizing about their dissemination (e.g., Branch 1988; Ellingson 1995; Freedman 1999; Garrow 1978; Gerhards and Rucht 1992), this is not the same as demonstrating that such frame work matters, and empirical studies in natural settings with this object in mind are in short supply. So far the literature has been “long on ringing, programmatic statements, and short on the kinds of detailed empirical applications that would allow for a real assessment of the worth of the concept” (McAdam 1996, 354).

Voters and Elections

The literature on voters and elections is huge, and there are good reasons for it: because elections help to translate public opinion into government policy (Dahl 1956); because the right to vote is a defining and ennobling feature of democratic citizenship (Shklar 1991a); and because participating in elections is the everyday American’s primary form of political activity (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).
Voting as an Affirmation of Party Loyalty

An excellent place to begin is with The People’s Choice (1948), Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet’s attempt to “discover how and why people voted as they did” (1). In their analysis, voting is a social act: “a person thinks, politically, as he is, socially. Social characteristics determine political preferences” (27). And by social characteristics, Lazarsfeld and his colleagues meant class, religion, and place of residence. Middle-class Protestants who lived out in the country voted for Willkie, while working-class Catholics who lived in the city supported Roosevelt. Voters with contradictory social locations—middle class Catholics, say—felt “cross-pressured,” and so vacillated between the candidates and decided late in the campaign, if they managed to decide at all.

The People’s Choice is well worth rereading, but the account of voting it offered up was soon displaced by a new approach developed by a psychologically oriented team headed by Angus Campbell, which shifted explanatory emphasis from voter’s social characteristics to their political attitudes. The hallmark of this account, spelled out in grand style in The American Voter (Campbell et al. 1960), was the voter’s abiding attachment to party. In this treatment, party identification was a standing commitment, a “persistent adherence” (Campbell et al. 1960, 146), one of considerable value to citizens as they were called upon to decide matters of politics:

To the average person the affairs of government are remote and complex, and yet the average citizen is asked periodically to formulate opinions about these affairs. At the very least he has to decide how he will vote, what choice he will make between candidates offering different programs and very different versions of contemporary political events. In this dilemma, having the party symbol stamped on certain candidates, certain issue positions, certain interpretations of political reality is of great psychological convenience. (Stokes 1966a, 126–27)

Going further, Converse (1966a) argued that the vote could usefully be partitioned into two components: the “normal vote,” reflecting voters’ durable commitments to a party, on the one hand, and short-term deviations from the normal vote, reflecting response to transient election circumstances, on the other. The value of this model was illustrated in a series of brilliant reports on the presidential elections of 1960, 1964, and 1968 (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse, Clausen, and Miller 1965; Converse, Miller, Rusk, and Wolfe 1969).

This account of voting, which places party identification at the center of the voters’ calculus, has been challenged in recent decades, and from two directions. The central theme of the first is party decline (e.g., Burnham 1982; Wattenberg
The oft-noted trend away from the parties and toward political independence seems an obvious menace to the doctrine set out in *The American Voter*: citizens who make no explicit claim on party can hardly be counted as party voters. The surge of Independents also raises questions about the quality of electoral choice, for compared to partisans, independents “have somewhat poorer knowledge of the issues, their image of the candidates is fainter, their interest in the campaign is less, their concern over the outcome is relatively light, and their choice between competing candidates, although it is indeed made later in the campaign, seems much less to spring from discoverable evaluations of the elements of national politics” (Campbell et al. 1960, 143). An electorate running over with Independents would not only threaten a theory of voting but would also imply a public less capable of making wise political choices.

Neither implication stands up very well to inspection. It turns out that “Independent Partisans”—those who first say they are Independents and then claim a party preference—differ substantially from “Pure Independents”—those who claim no party preference whatsoever. Independent Partisans express a keener interest in politics and public affairs, know more about politics, vote more frequently, and participate more avidly in campaigns than do Pure Independents (Keith, Magleby, Nelson, Orr, Westlye, and Wolfinger 1992). And the growth of Independents over the last forty years has been primarily due to growth in Independents with partisan inclinations. Moreover, while the importance of partisanship to voting declined in the 1960s and 1970s, it has since revived. Indeed, the role of party loyalty in presidential voting is greater now than in the elections of the 1950s that gave rise to the assertion of partisanship’s preeminence in the first place (Bartels 2000; Miller 1991).

But this leaves a second line of criticism. In *The American Voter*, party identification was defined as a durable attachment. “Only an event of extraordinary intensity,” Campbell and his colleagues wrote, “can arouse any significant part of the electorate to the point that its established party loyalties are shaken” (Campbell et al. 1960, 151). This interpretation has come under vigorous challenge. The central contention here is that party identification should be regarded not as a standing decision but as a “running balance sheet on the two parties” (Fiorina 1977b, 618).

It turns out that party identification is at least somewhat responsive to what the parties do. When parties nominate especially appealing or repulsive candidates (Jennings and Markus 1984), when they promote popular or disagreeable policies (Gerber and Jackson 1993; Markus and Converse 1979), when they deliver peace, prosperity, and domestic tranquility or fail spectacularly to do so (Fiorina 1981), at least some citizens notice and adjust their loyalties accordingly. These results are generally quite modest, however, and under some specifications they disappear altogether (Green and Palmquist 1990; Schickler and Green 1993–94).
Party identification is not immovable, but it is hard to move, and in this respect the metaphor of the running balance sheet seems quite misleading.

**Voting as a Response to Short-Term Forces**

If, to a first approximation, the vote can be understood as partisanship plus, what can be said about the short-term forces that can compel voters to abandon, momentarily, their party’s candidate for another’s? One prominent possibility here is policy: that all other things (including partisanship) equal, voters are inclined to support candidates whose views on policy more closely resemble their own. And so it seems to be, though the strength of the connection between policy and vote is sharply constrained both by the limited information that most voters bring to politics and by the clarity and aggressiveness with which rival candidates push alternative programs (e.g., Aldrich, Sullivan, and Borgida 1989; Nie, Verba, and Petrocik 1979; Pomper 1972). Candidates who differ on important issues and make a habit of saying so will certainly encourage policy voting, but we should not make the mistake of assuming that everyone will get the message (Page and Brody 1972).8

Perhaps more consequential than the policies that parties promise are the results that they deliver. Are economic conditions improving? Is the nation’s defense sound? In answering such questions, voters need only to take stock of how things are going and then credit or blame the incumbent party accordingly. Or, as Butler and Stokes once put it, “The preeminent means by which the public simplifies the complexity of government action is by shifting its attention from policies to performance, from government action to the values that government may achieve” (Butler and Stokes 1974, 285). So it seems. National elections are, in important part, referenda on the incumbent party’s performance in office (Fiorina 1981b).

This is a clear and repeatable result, but it leaves open the question of what kinds of evidence voters consult in deciding whether the incumbent’s performance has been glorious, or abysmal, or merely ordinary. One appealing hypothesis is self-interest: perhaps citizens simply examine their own circumstances, voting for the incumbent when things have gone well in their lives, and voting for change when things have gone badly. A political calculus based on such homespun calculations would greatly reduce the costs that are normally incurred by becoming informed about politics. Against this, though, is the evidence I reviewed earlier on the surprisingly small role self-interest normally plays in public opinion. A second possibility is that voters pay attention not so much to their own situation as they reach political decisions, but rather to the situation of the country—the “sociotropic hypothesis” (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981). Instead of asking the incumbent “What have you done for me lately?”
sociotropic voters ask “What have you done for the nation lately?” Conceding that the perfect empirical test has yet to be run, various kinds of evidence suggest that voters follow the sociotropic logic more closely than self-interest. That is, voters respond to changes in general economic conditions more than to changes in their personal economic lives (e.g., Alesina, Londregan, and Rosenthal 1993; Feldman 1982, 1995; Kramer 1983; Bartels and Brady 1993; Cowden and Hartley 1992; Kinder, Adams, and Gronke 1989; Lewis-Beck 1988; Markus 1988).

A third and final short-term force I’ll consider here invokes the personal side of politics. Back in *The Voter Decides* (1954), Campbell and his colleagues partitioned the vote into three parts: parties, policies, and candidates. In the considerable debate that followed over the capacity of voters to make sensible choices, the candidate term largely receded into the background. There were occasional exceptions, however, and they all made the same point: that citizens vote in overwhelming numbers for the candidate they like better (e.g., Kelley and Miner 1974; Stokes 1966a). This unremarkable observation—one hesitates to call it a “finding”—eventually sparked a line of inquiry on candidate-centered voting. The central claim here is that presidential candidates are judged partly by the sort of person they seem to be.

In fact, when asked to describe what they like and dislike about a particular president, or an ideal president, or any number of presidential contenders, Americans refer frequently to aspects of character. Especially prominent are references to competence and integrity. Presidents are judged by their intelligence, knowledge, and experience, on the one hand, and by their honesty, decency, and ability to set a moral example, on the other. Such judgments seem consequential, in that voters’ assessments of candidates in these terms powerfully predict the choices they make (e.g., Kinder 1986; Markus 1982; Miller, Wattenberg, and Malanchuk 1986; Miller and Shanks 1996).

**Explaining Elections**

I turn next from voters to elections, from the mysteries of the individual voter to the mysteries of the electorate. About time, Key would say: “If the specialist in electoral behavior is to be a student of politics, his major concern must be the population of elections, not the population of individual voters” (Key 1961, 55).

The study of voters and the study of elections are of course related but they are not identical projects (Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes 1966). Examining elections imposes an additional burden: not only to identify variables that strongly and recurrently affect vote choice, but variables that themselves change (in level or in effect) in notable ways from one election to the next. From this perspective then, the key to understanding electoral change requires identifying
forces that deflect the electorate from its normal, or standing, decision (Campbell 1966; Shively 1992).

One such force is the introduction of new (or newly framed) disputes over policy. When presidential candidates stray too far from the views of the public on important matters, they are punished at the polls (Rosenstone 1983). The skirmishing over which issues will prevail in a presidential campaign can be seen as one important part of a larger process that Riker (1982) calls the “political mobilization of tastes.” In Riker’s scheme, new issues arise because leaders are constantly preoccupied with assembling a winning coalition, and see in a new issue, or in a new way of framing an issue, a way to achieve it.

Electoral outcomes are responsive as well to changes in national conditions—particularly to changes in national economic conditions. Prosperity (and economic stability) advantages the incumbent president’s party, while economic decline (and volatility) enhances the chances of the opposition (e.g. Alesina, Londregan, and Rosenthal 1993; Erickson 1989; Markus 1988; Quinn and Woolley 2001; Rosenstone 1983). A slightly more robust economy in 1960 would have made Nixon president; likewise, a stagnating economy had much to do with Carter’s defeat in 1980. Third and last is the appearance of particularly irresistible or repellent candidates. Eisenhower’s personal magnetism was decisive in 1952 and 1956; Goldwater’s image in 1964 and McGovern’s in 1972 were just as decisive, but in the opposite direction. In this way, the dynamics of presidential elections are, as Stokes put it, “particularly tied to the emergence of new candidates” (1966b, 28).

In short, deviations from the electorate’s normal vote seem motivated primarily by three forces, each completely familiar from research on the individual voter: the introduction of new issue divisions, changes in national circumstances, and the emergence of new candidates. Deeply felt issues, national crises, and commanding personalities may tilt the electorate’s preferences in one direction, for a time. But when the issue agenda goes on to something new, when the national crisis eases, when candidates pass from the scene, the electorate tends to return to a division of the vote that more closely reflects the more or less abiding strength of the rival parties.

Electoral change is not always a short-lived deviation from a stationary equilibrium point, however. At special junctures, the equilibrium point itself shifts. The hallmark of such turning points is the critical election, characterized by a “sharp and durable electoral realignment between parties” (Key 1955, 16). Critical elections and the national realignments of party strength that accompany them have come three times since the origins of the modern party system, at intervals of about a generation: first in the 1850s, second near the turn of the twentieth century, and third and most recently during the 1930s, in the depths of the Great Depression (Beck 1974; Brady 1988; Burnham 1970; Campbell 1966;
Clubb, Flanigan, and Zingale 1980; Sundquist 1983). If, as Burnham and others argue, there is a generational rhythm to realignments, then the fourth case is long overdue. The tardiness of the next realignment, the formidable complexity of realigning periods when examined closely, and the assertion that partisan attachments are in constant (if slow) motion, have combined to produce a crisis of confidence in realignment theory (Carmines and Stimson 1989; MacKuen, Erikson, and Stimson 1989; Silbey 1991b).

The critics will probably prevail in this debate, and perhaps they should (though see Nardulli 1995 for a spirited defense of a reconceived concept of realignment). But in these various discussions over the strengths and shortcomings of the idea of realignment and critical elections, one point has been overlooked. A case of realignment—in all respects exemplary—has recently taken place in the United States: centered in the American South, precipitated by the racial crisis of the late 1950s and early 1960s that was every bit as gripping as the economic dislocation of the 1930s, and set in motion by the Johnson-Goldwater presidential contest of 1964, which offered the country a clear choice on matters of race. In consequence, black Americans moved nearly unanimously into the Democratic Party, and Southern whites moved out. The political reverberations of this rearrangement of party loyalties are still being registered. The South, solidly Democratic for most of the twentieth century, is now solidly Republican (Black and Black 1992, 2002; Kinder and Sanders 1996).

Representation

Although impressed with the contributions made by sociologists and psychologists to the understanding of public opinion, Key worried about the drift in this work away from politics, going so far as to suggest that the study of public opinion be discontinued “unless the findings about the preferences, aspirations, and prejudices of the public can be connected with the workings of the governmental system” (Key 1961, 535). Key’s concern carries us to a consideration of representation, mercifully my final topic.

Democracy in anything like pure form in so vast and complex a society as the United States is obviously impractical. In place of the citizen’s assembly of the ancient city-state we find instead the various institutions and practices of representative government. Notable among these are that control over the policies of government is constitutionally vested in official representatives, and that such representatives are chosen through fair and regular elections, open more or less to all citizens (Dahl 1989). Under such arrangements, representatives must decide how to spend their time, focus their activities, and vote on matters of policy. As they go about the public’s business, what weight do they give to the preferences and priorities of their constituents (Pitkin 1967)?
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One useful approach to this question comes from up-close, fine-grain investigations of representatives at work. An excellent case in point is supplied by Kingdon (1973), who spent 1969 interviewing a cross-section of members of the US House of Representatives, concentrating his conversations on a small number of recent or pending votes. Kingdon concluded that constituent views were often quite influential in such decisions. Representatives reported that they would sometimes cave in to constituency pressure rather than face having to explain a contrary votes; many believed that a string of such votes was likely to lead to serious and perhaps fatal reprisals at the next election; and some thought that even a single vote against district sentiment ran quite a risk—not because the people back home were watching carefully at the time of the vote, but because their opponents next time would resurrect such votes and place them at the center of their campaigns. Kingdon’s design and evidence do not allow us to estimate in any precise way the weight of constituent opinion, but it seems reasonable to conclude with him that when members of Congress vote on matters of policy, constituency opinion is one of several important considerations they take into account.

Complementing this Washington work is Fenno’s *Home Style* (1978), a winning analysis of House members in their home districts. From the fall of 1970 until the spring of 1977, Fenno traveled intermittently with some eighteen House members as they met with constituents, listened to their problems, and attempted to explain their votes and activities to the folks back home. More through observation than interrogation, Fenno too uncovered evidence of representation. Or at least, evidence that members of Congress were assiduous in seeking out the views of those they were elected to represent. As Fenno points out, a member of Congress “cannot represent any people unless he knows, or makes an effort to know, who they are, what they think, and what they want . . .” (Fenno 1978, 233). And looking through Fenno’s eyes, it is hard not to be impressed by how hard representatives work at this: time spent at home appears to be an endless and exhausting series of “open meetings, town meetings, open office hours, receptions, coffees, shopping plaza touring, mainstreeting, plant gating, door knocking, block working” and more (Fenno 1978, 236). In all these ways, representatives appear almost desperate to discover what their constituents want and need.

The rub in all this, from a democratic point of view, is that representatives, according to Fenno’s observations, are interested much more in some of their constituents than in others. Members of Congress care most about their core supporters (the “primary” constituency). Moreover, whereas “the people” are hard or enormously time consuming to find, knots of people clustered into
groups and organizations are not, and so representatives with limited time and energy end up listening to certain interests more than others. The constituency a member represents is the constituency he or she sees.

As perceptive and valuable as these observations are, in order to generate precise estimates of representation we need a different kind of study, one that entails, as Converse once put it, “independent but interlocking investigations between the grassroots citizens of political constituencies and the leadership delegated to represent them, with the emphasis on the policy outcomes that arise as a result of popular elections” (Converse 1975, 149). The prototype is the famous Miller and Stokes (1963) examination of representation in the U.S. Congress. Fulfilling Converse’s requirements, Miller and Stokes drew upon interviews with constituents residing in a representative sample of congressional districts and independent interviews with their representatives in Washington. This design allowed them to determine the relationship between constituent opinion (aggregated by district) and members’ votes on relevant matters of national policy. Miller and Stokes found that representation varied sharply by domain: strong on civil rights, modest on social spending, and faint on foreign affairs.9

A second major study of representation is provided by Verba and Nie’s (1972) investigation of community leaders and local opinion set in small American towns in 1967. Like Miller and Stokes’s groundbreaking study of U.S. House members, Verba and Nie collected independent and interlocked observations of leaders and their appropriate publics. And like Miller and Stokes, Verba and Nie discovered a good bit of congruence. Specifically, Verba and Nie found that the community problems thought most important by ordinary citizens were also those identified by local leaders. Congruence of this variety was greater for politically active citizens, and it was especially pronounced in communities characterized by well-attended elections. In such communities, furthermore, congruence increased still more insofar as citizens took an active part in politics generally: helping in campaigns, participating in local organizations, seeking out particular leaders with special requests. These results suggest, as Converse (1975, 155–56) has pointed out, that elections play a special role in the representation process: high turnout elections seem to encourage among the local leadership echelon a generalized sensitivity to their constituents’ interests, making them more sensitive than they would otherwise be to the more detailed and specific demands that occasionally come their way.

Bartels’s (1991) investigation of defense spending during the Reagan years provides a detailed look at representation on a single and high profile issue. President Reagan took office in 1981 having made defense policy the centerpiece of his campaign, and then succeeded in his first budget in securing a large increase in Pentagon spending. Bartels’s analysis aimed to determine the extent
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to which members of Congress were responsive to constituent opinion in their votes on defense. Relying on a national survey of voters carried out in 1980, Bartels first estimated constituent opinion in each of some 108 congressional districts (selected to be representative of the entire set of districts), and then compared such opinions to the votes cast by House members on key defense appropriation bills in the 1981 session, finding a very strong relationship between the two. To assess the overall consequences of this strong relationship, Bartels contrasted actual Congressional spending on defense with predicted spending had public opinion supported the status quo, and concluded that virtually all of the sizable Reagan buildup could be attributed to legislators responding directly and immediately to their constituents’ opinions—a pure a case as one could imagine of government giving the people what they wanted.

Actual votes on consequential bills are important, of course, and roll-call voting certainly captures some of what is meant by representation, but not everything. To put it in a stylized way, members of Congress make two decisions about every issue that comes before them: what position to take, and how active to be (Hall 1996). As Hall argues, it is the obligation of the “good delegate” not only to take positions consistent with constituent views, but also to throw themselves and the resources of their office into legislative contests where their constituents have clear and abiding interests. In fact, Hall finds strong evidence of this kind of representation at work within the contemporary Congress, across different policy domains, for different kinds of legislative activities, and at various stages of the legislative process. Altogether, members of Congress seem quite sensitive to district interests, as those interests are invoked by legislative matters that come before them. When members sense that a bill has direct relevance to their district, they invest significant amounts of their scarce time, energy, and staff in legislative action.10

Empirical demonstrations of congruence between constituent interest and opinion, on the one side, and legislative activity and outcome, on the other, are impressive. But the studies I’ve noted here—and others like them (e.g., Burstein 1985; Converse and Pierce 1986; Fiorina 1974; Jackson and King 1989)—do not provide conclusive evidence of the responsiveness of government to popular will. Observed congruence between opinion and policy might reflect the influence of public opinion on government policy, but it might also reflect the reverse, the influence of government on opinion. For example, in the case of defense spending so well analyzed by Bartels, public “demand” for increases in defense appropriations was plausibly a reaction at least in part to an effective campaign waged by Ronald Reagan in his successful run for the presidency in 1980. Or congruence might mean that leaders and publics are both responding to the same events in roughly the same way. In November of 1979 the American embassy in Tehran was taken over by Iranian militants; a month later the Soviet
Union invaded Afghanistan. At the time, both episodes were widely interpreted to reveal weakness in the standing of the United States in the international community and as a consequence could have altered both opinion and policy. Or congruence might only reflect “inadvertent” representation. Representatives come from particular places; sharing experiences in common with their constituents, they may develop similar outlooks. As a result, members of Congress could vote consistently with their constituents, all the while utterly indifferent to what the folks back home have to say.

These problems can be evaded at least in part by studying representation over time. This is the path taken by Stimson and his colleagues in their analysis of “national mood” (Stimson 1999; Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995; Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002; also see Jacobs and Shapiro 1999 and Page and Shapiro 1983). By mood Stimson means the public’s preference toward government programs in general: “for a larger, more active federal government, as opposed to a smaller, more passive one across the sphere of all domestic policy controversies (Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995, 548). Stimson argues that the national mood is exactly what elected politicians worry over, and that they anticipate its consequences for future elections by modifying their positions and votes on matters of national policy. To test this claim, Stimson and his associates develop a measure of national mood, on the one hand, and a set of policy measures, each associated with a distinct branch of the federal government, on the other, with both sets of measures running annually from 1956 to the mid-1990s. The question then is whether the twists and turns evident in the path taken by the nation’s mood have consequences for shifts in federal policy. And the answer is: they do. Policies proposed and passed at the national level appear to respond rapidly to shifts in national mood.

If, as these results imply, mood is the engine of democracy, what makes mood go? Economic conditions, at least in part: when the American public is optimistic about the economic future, the national mood moves to the left, calling for more government; when the public’s economic expectations sour, the national mood grows conservative, calling for cuts in government programs (Durr 1993; Stevenson 2001). There is a certain logic to this, but it is also perverse, in that the public appears ready to have its government do more precisely when there is less to do, and worse, is least willing to support government programs exactly when they are needed most. Big swings in mood are motivated by something else, however: in Stimson’s (1999) telling, a kind of pragmatic reaction against major policy initiatives gone too far. Mood, that is, appears to swing back from ideological excess, on the left or on the right. Thus in response to the Great Society initiatives of Lyndon Johnson, the American public said enough, and moved to the right; a quarter century later, responding to cuts in government programs set in motion by Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980, the American pub-
lic said enough again, this time moving to the left. To Stimson, the mood of the nation seems guided by prudence and good sense:

It is what one would expect of an informed and thoughtful public that knew its collective mind. To produce equilibration requires a collective public opinion that knows what it wants, that observes what it gets, and that reacts appropriately when it gets more of what it wanted (in either direction) than it asked for. This is not an electorate that looks easy to convince, not one that will follow a pied piper president using symbols for a flute. This looks like a tougher bunch altogether. (Stimson 1991, 125)

Policy Change through Electoral Replacement

As representatives contemplate their choices—to vote for or against impeachment, say, or in favor of or in opposition to committing American forces to war in the Middle East—they may look to the future and worry about public opinion that might be mobilized against them by their opponents when the next election rolls around. Key calls this “latent opinion,” arguing that as a practical political matter, it “is really about the only type of opinion that generates much anxiety” (Key 1961, 262). The anxiety that Key refers to has to do with the prospect of being thrown out of office, of course, and his notion of latent opinion points to the special role assigned to elections in the enforcement of representation. Elections are, or should be, the “critical technique,” as Dahl (1956) once put it, for ensuring that leaders take into account the interests and opinions of voters.

Do elections matter in this way? Yes. Regarding economic policy, for example, parties differ in their priorities and remedies and enact these differences when given the chance. Thus in Western industrial nations in the postwar period, parties of the left, when in power, have tried to achieve full employment; parties of the right, meanwhile, have worried more about driving down inflation (Hibbs 1977, 1979; Tufte 1978). Control of the executive branch by the left in the United States and elsewhere leads, furthermore, to a larger and more rapidly growing public sector and to redistributive tax programs (Cameron 1978; Franzese 2002). More generally, presidents and parties carry out their convention and campaign pledges quite faithfully (e.g., Budge and Hofferbert 1990). According to various kinds of evidence, then, governments pursue policies broadly consistent with the interests and opinions of their core political constituencies. Elections appear to offer voters the opportunity to signal their pleasure or displeasure with the governing party, to return or replace leaders accordingly, and thereby to set in motion alterations in government policy.

If, as these results imply, elections are a primary instrument for translating the aspirations and wishes of the public into actual policy, we should remember that
not all citizens take part in the electoral process. Participation in American elections is in fact marked by huge and persistent inequalities, most notably by class. And those who participate express different priorities and favor different remedies from those who stay home (Leighley and Nagler 1992; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Verba, Schlozman, Brady, and Nie 1993; Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). Because citizens express their aspirations and defend their interests through participation, failing to take part diminishes the chances that they will get what they need. As Key put it, “in the operations of government those who make themselves heard, those who argue their case, and those who take a hand enjoy an advantage” (Key 1961, 428).

Past and Future

Forty years ago, when Key complained about social psychologists hijacking the study of public opinion, he nevertheless found it possible to compliment them for their “methodological virtuosity” (Key 1961, vii). If Key was impressed then, he would be astonished today. This is the most obvious, if so far implicit, lesson of my review. Dramatic improvements in statistical analysis (e.g., Bartels and Brady 1993; King 1997); a growing (though still insufficient) sensitivity to issues of measurement and error (e.g., Achen 1983; Bartels 1993); a deeper understanding of virtually all aspects of the sample survey, still the method of choice for the study of mass politics (e.g., Schwarz, Groves, and Schuman 1998; Brehm 1993; Rasinski, Rips, and Tourangeau 2002); the proliferation of experimental studies (e.g., Kinder and Palfrey 1993): all this and more leaves me impressed with how far the field has come methodologically in so brief a time. Our tools are much sharper and precise than those Key and his contemporaries had in hand, more like scalpels than axes. Fine tools are no substitute for theoretical imagination, of course, and in this respect our current understanding of mass politics, though in many ways more nuanced and extensive than four decades ago, remains conspicuously and heavily indebted to Key’s generation.

Part of my assignment, and my final business here, is to identify important avenues for research in the coming years. One has to do with the concept of opinion (or attitude) itself, which has been and no doubt will continue to be central to the study of mass politics. Over the last twenty years or so, the idea of attitude has undergone a transformation from, roughly speaking, fixed preferences to fluid constructions (e.g., Bartels 2002; Feldman 1995; Tourangeau, Rips, and Rasinski 2000; Zaller 1992). This move amounts to the study of public opinion catching up to the conventional wisdom inside psychology. All well and good: the study of mass politics has borrowed ideas and methods from psychology and sociology and economics over the years, and is much the better for it. I’m here only to say that there is another serious rethinking of the idea of attitude under-
way in psychology, one that insists that our judgments and decisions and action are influenced by attitudes that we are quite unaware of and that can be activated outside our consciousness (e.g., Bargh and Wegner 1998). The existence of such “implicit” or “automatic” attitudes has deep implications for our measurement and analysis of public opinion, not to mention what normative sense we make of our results.

A second opportunity for the future takes for granted that public opinion as a whole responds in sensible ways to new information. If that is so, then we need to get serious about how information is created and disseminated. For this we need theories of campaigns and journalism, and we need systematic empirical work that connects the “information system,” on the one hand, with the judgments made and actions taken by individual citizens, on the other (for steps in this direction, see Bartels 1998; Hilgartner and Bosk 1988; Jones 1994).

Third and finally, I hope for a future turn in the study of mass politics towards a closer interaction between, to put it in a stylized way, psychology and economics, between models of thinking and choice, on the one side, and institutions, constraints, and incentives, on the other. What kinds of governmental arrangements make retrospective voting possible (Powell and Whitten 1993)? How might electoral institutions amplify or neutralize social conflict (Orneshock and Shvetsova 1994)? Questions like these call for interdisciplinary trespassing of a particular and perhaps formidable sort, for the integration of theories of mind and theories of institutions. A satisfying science of mass politics will require no less.

Notes

1. *Public Opinion and American Democracy* is a great book, but Key did something even more impressive that year, or so the legend goes: “True to his stern ethic of three pages written before breakfast each day, he arrived at the Institute for Social Research bright on a Sunday morning to find smoke pouring out of a coffee heater left on the night before. The old building would have been a tenderbox; and the many boxes of IBM cards and interview protocols, including the first five national election studies, would have smoldered nicely as well. This heroic episode has long been remembered locally as the time V. O. saved the study of public opinion single-handedly” (Converse 1988, 40).

2. Things are probably both better and worse than these figures suggest. Better, because standard practice in the measurement of political knowledge probably underestimates a bit what people really know, discouraging those with partial knowledge from offering an answer (Mondak 2001). And worse, because those Americans who refuse to take part in surveys or who are never contacted in the first place are considerably less well-informed than the public as a whole (Brehm 1993). For more on what political knowledge means and how it should be measured, see Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), Iyengar (1990), Mondak (2001), and Zaller (1990).

3. Dawson shows that black Americans express consistent support for (or opposition to)
black nationalist ideas, but not whether subscribing to (or rejecting) black nationalism has implications for their views on a wide range of diverse political questions. Such relationships must be demonstrated, in my view, if black nationalism is to be considered an ideology.

4. The standard interpretation for framing, agenda-setting, and priming builds directly on basic research in cognition, and gives center stage to automatic processing (Price and Tewksbury 1997; Cappella and Jamieson 1997). The story runs roughly this way: communications highlight some aspects of politics at the expense of others; when citizens notice such communications, relevant parts of their memory are automatically activated; those bits and pieces of activated memory are thereby rendered accessible; and accessible constructs and information exercise disproportionate influence over the opinions and evaluations that citizens express. Under this account, mental processes are set into motion by environmental provocations and operate outside of conscious awareness. Whether framing, agenda-setting, and priming effects can actually be explained in this way, however, is a matter of current contention. The evidence for accessibility and automatic processing is either mixed (e.g., Valentino, Hutchings, and White 2002 find evidence that priming is mediated by accessibility, while Miller and Krosnick 2000 do not) or indirect (e.g., Mendelberg 2001). The major alternative to accessibility entails a more thoughtful, self-conscious, and effortful process. In the case of framing, for example, the argument is that by singling out certain features of an issue or event, frames imply which considerations to take into account, but the final arbiter is the citizen, who chooses which of the available considerations are relevant, and who decides how important each consideration should be (Gross 2001; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Chong 1996). This debate about the psychological underpinnings of framing recapitulates a broader conversation in psychology over the extent to which everyday judgments, decisions, and behavior are under conscious control (see, for example, Posner and Snyder 1975; Bargh and Ferguson 2000).

5. So it was in 1940, and so it was, evidently, in 1948. In Voting, Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954, 248) report the results of a similar investigation, situated this time in Elmira New York and focusing on the famous Dewey-Truman presidential contest, concluding once again that mass communication “crystallizes and reinforces more than it converts.”

6. Conceptions of partisan identification differ over this point of immunity to the campaign (see, for instance, Fiorina 1981b; Jennings and Markus 1984; Markus and Converse 1979).

7. In the interests of space, I will focus here on just three kinds of answers: one has to do with resources, another with mobilization, and the third with action frames. For a broader discussion of participation than I can afford here, see Nie and Verba (1975), and McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001).

8. As to what, exactly, voters are doing when they engage in policy voting, there are two competing claims. Under the “spatial” theory, voters have genuine opinions on issues and clear and accurate perceptions of the positions taken by the contending candidates. Voters then calculate the distance between their own position and those of the candidates, preferring the candidate whose position is closer to their own (e.g., Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook 1970). Under the “directional” theory (Rabinowitz and MacDonald 1989), voters’ reactions to issues are assumed to be diffuse and emotion-laden, and they prefer candidates who they see as being on their side, especially on issues they care deeply about. The spatial and directional theories of issue voting offer quite different accounts, but it is not at
all clear whether, with current data and standard methods, they can be distinguished empirically (MacDonald, Rabinowitz, and Listhaug 1998; King and Lewis 2000; Westholm 1997).

9. For commentaries on the study of representation carried out in this fashion, see Achen (1978), Converse and Pierce (1986), and Weissberg (1978).

10. This seems good for representation, and it is, but the story is more complicated in that representation of district interests one member at a time may have unhappy consequences for the institution as a whole. The problem here is that representatives who throw themselves into the legislative process out of a sense that their district’s interests are at stake turn out to be quite unrepresentative of the entire chamber in the positions they advocate and the votes they ultimately cast, especially on issues with concentrated benefits and dispersed costs (Hall 1996).