

Positive Constructs of Public Opinion

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Public opinion is not like a rock that can be picked up, turned over, and casually examined. Like all hypothetical constructs, it can be apprehended only in terms of the theoretical apparatus in which it is embedded. The purpose of this essay is to examine the most important constructions of public opinion as they manifest themselves in contemporary opinion research.¹

I. THE CURRENTLY DOMINANT CONSTRUCT AND ITS COMPETITORS

For the vast majority of opinion researchers, "public opinion" is simply *the aggregate of responses to nationally representative polls*. Two factors appear to account for the popularity of this construct: The ease with which it lends itself to systematic and quantitative research, and its close fit with the widely accepted ideal of individualist democracy, in which every citizen has an opinion on every issue, and in which these opinions are, at least in a normative sense, equally important. Occasional outsiders (for example, Ginsberg, 1986) criticize over-reliance on surveys to measure public opinion, but few survey-oriented researchers pay any attention. What these researchers do emphasize is the internal validity of their construct. Hence, researchers make enormous efforts to ensure that polls

"sample" citizens in a manner that gives each a fully equal chance to participate, and that polls ask unbiased and universally intelligible questions.

Most researchers devote themselves to particular substantive issues—for example, racial attitudes, presidential elections, and so forth. They have no desire to engage in debates on the fundamental nature of public opinion. Nonetheless, the question "what, after all, are we doing here?" has occasionally pressed itself with too much urgency to be put off. With one exception, to be noted below, the question has emerged when opinion data have behaved in ways that could raise doubts about the utility of the dominant approach to studying mass opinion. The most important of these doubts have centered on whether citizens meet the basic prerequisite of the dominant construct, that is, having opinions to be measured; and on whether surveys can pose questions in a sufficiently neutral manner. How to resolve these problems has received much attention from scholars attempting to shore up the foundations of the standard approach, as we shall see below.

Two alternatives to the dominant construct have won respectful hearings, if not necessarily practical commitment, among opinion researchers. One construct tries to get beyond the apparent superficiality of many responses to survey questions to *what the public would want, if fully informed and rational*. This construct might be referred to as "enlightened opinion." Research on enlightened opinion has not come together as a coherent research tradition, but concern with the general idea is widespread.

Further afield from the research mainstream is V. O. Key's (1961) conception

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of public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed." The most politically relevant public opinions, as Key continues, are those "*latent opinions*" that are likely to become crystallized at the time of the next election, when they may result in incumbent politicians being thrown out of office. Key's concept of "latent opinion" is not very amenable to systematic empirical research, but some research exists and more can be expected.

The next part of this essay expands on the critique of the major problems that have arisen in connection with the dominant (aggregate) construct and three responses to those problems. Part III describes the problem that has given rise to the concept of enlightened opinion and the initial efforts to deal with this problem. Part IV describes Key's construct of latent opinion and the few efforts that utilize the construct. Part V offers some concluding observations.

II. PROBLEMS WITH THE DOMINANT CONSTRUCT

Philip Converse and the Non-Attitudes Debate

In the first *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Allport (1935) proposed this definition:

An attitude is a mental and neural state of readiness, organized through experience, exerting a directive or dynamic influence upon the individual's response to all objects and situations with which it is related (p. 810).

Because the academic study of public opinion began as an offshoot of psychology, Allport's classic definition of attitude has been studied by everyone who learned the craft of opinion research in graduate school. If, however, this definition has actually influenced anyone's work on public opinion, I am unaware of it. Although well-crafted to reflect the concerns of psychologists, it has little relevance to problems that arise in public opinion research.

Influential work on the nature of the survey responses that constitute the basic data for virtually all research on mass opinion began with Converse's 1964 essay, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." Though its influence has waned, this paper dominated research on the nature of public opinion for some two decades and remains even today the starting point of most discussion.

The theoretical core of the essay extends an analysis first reported in a chapter of *The American Voter*, another paradigm-setting piece (Campbell et al., 1960). The concern there was that presidential elections could be interpreted as ideological mandates. This was then a lively issue, because Dwight Eisenhower had just won two presidential elections in what was widely interpreted by pundits as a "turn to the right." The authors of *The American Voter* disputed this interpretation. Only a small percentage of Americans conceptualize political conflict in ideological terms, they argued. The type of thinking that animates most voting decisions is more down-to-earth, such as beliefs that a candidate is "good for the working man," or "good for the farmer," or good for some other group. Also important are beliefs that one of the parties can be counted on to produce economic prosperity or war or some other general condition. Being faithful to "the nature of mass belief systems" thus entailed staying away from ideological interpretations of elections, and attending to more mundane types of voter concerns.

Converse developed this issue in his 1964 essay. One of the most important of his elaborations involved "attitude consistency"—the empirical tendency of individuals to take consistently liberal, conservative, or moderate positions across a range of seemingly disparate political issues. Converse presented evidence suggesting that this empirical tendency, though robust among elites, was weak among members of the general public. This evidence fed his general argument

that analyzing mass attitudes in left-right terms is not very meaningful.

Another important elaboration in Converse's 1964 paper concerned the nature of political attitudes, when he took up the question of whether responses to typical survey items—for example, Do you agree or disagree with policy X—might convey some sort of private ideological meaning, independent of the left-right continuum. He rejected this possibility, noting that when the same people are asked the same question at two or more points in time, their responses varied greatly. For a typical survey item, "only about thirteen people out of twenty manage to locate themselves even on the same *side* of the controversy in successive interrogations, when ten out of twenty could have done so by chance alone" (p. 239). How, he asked, could such randomly fluctuating "attitudes" be the basis of any ideology, conventional, private or otherwise?

To be sure, some kinds of questions (for example, racial attitudes, party attachments) achieved far greater stability than others (for example, role of the federal government in the economy). But this only strengthened Converse's main point, which was that citizens tend to think about politics more in terms of groups than of ideological principles.

In the course of this discussion, "over-time response stability" emerged as the defining criterion for having "real" attitudes. Converse recognized the possibility that people might have real attitudes and change them. But his data, which were based on three interviews of the same individuals at wide time intervals, convinced him that "conversion" is relatively rare. What was convincing (to Converse and everyone else who has examined these data) was that people's attitudes on the third wave of interrogation could be predicted almost as well from their first wave attitudes as from second. If the change between the first and second waves was meaningful rather than random, this would not have been so.

Most response instability, then, seemed to involve random fluctuation rather than genuine conversion. To capture this type of change, Converse developed a statistical model, called the "black-and-white" model, by which individuals were either stable across all three interviews and hence in possession of an attitude, or else unstable and hence in possession of a "non-attitude." There was no middle ground. This model gave a surprisingly good fit—though not, as Converse emphasized, a perfect fit—to much attitude data. Converse's conclusion from these findings was strongly put: "large portions of an electorate simply do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for a substantial period of time" (p. 245).

The "Measurement Error" Counter-Attack

Converse, in arguing against ideological interpretations of mass opinion and in favor of group-centered ones, ended up making a very large statement. This statement could have been construed as an attack on survey research as an instrument for measuring public opinion. But instead it was construed as an attack on popular sovereignty and hence democracy itself. In the name of these, scholars rushed to attack Converse. Converse's whole statement came under challenge, but what concerns us here is the attack on his nonattitudes thesis, which held that stability or instability was what qualified a survey response as a real attitude or a non-attitude. Of the several attacks launched, the one that stuck was that of Achen (1975).

Achen emphasized measurement error. As Achen pointed out, no attitude could be measured without error; therefore, even people with real attitudes could exhibit response instability from one interview to the next. Measurement error was to be expected, given the inherent vagueness of natural language and

the difficulty of mapping opinions onto arbitrary response scales.

Achen's statistical estimates, using the same data as Converse's, indicated that people's underlying true attitudes were almost perfectly stable, and that only the presence of large amounts of measurement error made it seem otherwise. Thus, the response instability that Converse had viewed as evidence of non-attitudes was, in Achen's model, taken as evidence of measurement error.

Achen's account of response instability was superior to Converse's in several respects. It was based on a concept (that is, measurement error) with an established scientific pedigree, whereas Converse's was based on an ad hoc assumption that even Converse admitted was not generally valid. Achen's model was also more powerful than Converse's in that it accommodated genuine attitude change (though, like Converse, Achen found little of it). Third, Achen's model generated precise estimates of the amount of error on each issue (for example, Achen found more for purely ideological issues than for racial issues). The capacity to quantify measurement error enabled Achen to estimate that its incidence was just as great among the most sophisticated citizens as among the least sophisticated, a finding that ran contrary to Converse's general position and hence embarrassed it.²

A final point in favor of Achen's model was that it rescued public opinion from the disturbing prospect of rampant non-attitudes. If that prospect had been accepted, either democracy, or perhaps more likely survey research as an instrument for divining the wishes of the democratic sovereign, might have been in hot water.

The Question-Answering Model of Opinion

The non-attitudes controversy was set in motion by the discovery of unexpectedly large amounts of over-time response instability. Achen's argument put

concern about this instability to rest, but even as he wrote, evidence for a new assault on the meaningfulness of the mass survey response was beginning to accumulate. Numerous researchers were finding that seemingly innocuous features of survey design affect the "public opinions" that people express. Among these are the order in which questions are asked, the order in which response alternatives are listed, and the inclusion or exclusion of seemingly irrelevant words or phrases. Here is a sampling of anomalous findings:

- In one survey, 37 percent of the public would allow communist reporters in the U.S.

Yet when, in another survey at the same time, respondents were first asked whether U.S. reporters should be allowed in Russia (which most favored), the percent agreeing to allow Russian reporters in the U.S. nearly doubled to 73 percent (Schuman and Presser, 1981).

- A random sample was asked to choose between these alternatives: *Some people feel the federal government in Washington should see to it that all people have adequate housing, while others feel each person should provide for his own housing.*

Approximately 45 percent responded that the government was responsible. But when the order of the response options was reversed in companion survey, only 30 percent said the government should be responsible.

The initial response of researchers to the effects of these and other seemingly innocuous features of survey design was to regard them as methodological artifacts that interfered with the effort to measure people's true attitudes. In 1984, however, I concluded that most people simply do not possess fixed attitudes, in the conventional sense of the term. What they possess instead is a jumble of frequently conflicting "considerations," each of which may predispose them in one direction or another, but no one of

which necessarily constitutes a "true attitude" on a given issue. The primary postulate of the "question-answering" model I suggested is that people respond to survey questions on the basis of whatever one or perhaps two considerations are at the "top of the head" at the moment of response.

The argument in Zaller and Feldman (1992) and Zaller (1992) is *neither* that public opinion is non-existent, nor that people have no reliable central tendency to their views. The argument, rather, is that for most people on most issues, there is a fairly but not indefinitely wide range within which, whether they recognize it or not, they are ambivalent. Which pole of their ambivalence gets expressed in a survey depends on the considerations that have been made salient by recent events, including question wording, question order, and what was in the news that day. This argument explains why seemingly innocuous features of the interview process can affect survey responses (by making one rather than another consideration salient), and it can also explain response instability (the consideration at the top-of-the-head at one interview may not be so salient at the next). Thus, the response stability that was for Converse evidence of non-attitudes, and was for Achen evidence of measurement error, is in the model I propose evidence of ambivalence.

Much more could be said about details of and evidence for the model, about essentially parallel though generally less radical (in a non-ideological sense) work by social psychologists (Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988; Wilson and Hodges, 1991; Schwarz, 1993), and about alternative models that argue for maintenance of the now-standard measurement error model. In the space available in this essay, however, it is probably most useful to consider some of the implications of the various models.

The first point is that the three models are less incommensurable than they might at first seem on their one point of mutual contact, response instability. Ex-

treme ambivalence might be essentially the same as a non-attitude. And the reason that people often bring different considerations to bear on the same question at different interviews (and for that reason exhibit response instability) may be, exactly as Achen argued, that survey questions are rarely so precisely worded as to force people to think about each issue the same way each time they confront it. A comparative virtue of the question-answering model, however, is that it readily accommodates all of these possibilities and everything in between, thereby making it a matter for empirical research how much ambivalence exists for what types of people and what types of issues. No doubt there are some people whose ambivalence is so total as to be tantamount to having non-attitudes. Others (for example, abortion activists) may experience no trace of ambivalence.

In other ways, the implications of the three models are more divergent. If Converse's non-attitudes thesis is correct, Achen wrote, "Democratic theory loses its starting point" (1975, p. 1227). This seems a bit strong, since the whole *American Voter* was aimed at showing how a plausible version of democracy worked in the United States on the basis of voters' group attachments, but Achen had a point. In contrast, the implication of Achen's empirical investigation was optimistic: Most members of the public have "true attitudes" which are almost perfectly stable after correcting for measurement error.

My position falls somewhere in between. I agree with Converse that a great deal of uncertainty, tentativeness and incomprehension marks the typical mass survey response. The problem is much deeper than vague questions. And yet, with Achen, I reject the premise of Converse's black-and-white non-attitudes model.

Another point of contrast involves political neutrality. Like Walter Cronkite, who used to conclude newscasts with the assurance that "that's the way it is . . .," pollsters like to think of themselves as

unobtrusively measuring "what the public really believes." The true attitude models of Converse and Achen make this view tenable. But the question-answering model makes opinion measurement in a poll difficult to defend as a completely neutral act, since how questions are framed always affects the responses.

Pollsters may maintain their belief in neutrality by continuing to do what they now do: force the public to choose between the major poles of the on-going *elite* debate on an issue. In this way, they pass the buck for framing the expression of public opinion back to the larger political community—politicians, issue activists, interest group leaders, journalists, and media consultants. It is the discourse of this larger elite, always conducted with one ear cocked to hear how the public is responding, that creates the specific "issues" on which "public opinion" is collected and published.

There is, I would add, nothing sinister about pollsters' role in constructing public opinion. Given a public with no fixed attitudes, but simply a range of only partially consistent considerations, someone must play the role of crystallizing issues in a way that leads to action. This is the job of political elites, including pollsters.

Finally, the three models differ in their implications for the nature of leadership. In the true attitude models of Converse and Achen, public opinion exists independently of the political process, and can therefore press its demands on leaders. In the question answering model, there may be no independent, unified public opinion to press demands, but a multiplicity of possible public opinions. Leadership then consists of elevating the salience of some of the public's considerations and harnessing them to new initiatives, while downplaying or ignoring other considerations.

This analysis suggests, then, that the model of an ambivalent, question-answering public is not only more faithful to the range of empirical regularities

associated with the mass survey response, but also more faithful to the role that public opinion plays in democratic politics. This model, however, currently enjoys no special status within the field. Converse's non-attitude model and Achen's measurement error model remain viable competitors. Scholars choose among models depending on which problematic aspect of opinion data, if any, seems important for their research program.

III. ENLIGHTENED OPINION

Radical social critics, as far back as the anti-Roman Christian proselytizers who asserted that man's deepest desire is to abjure the flesh and know God, have often asserted that the masses do not really want what, by all the observable evidence, they appear to want. Rousseau's notion of the General Will, as well as Marx's notion of false consciousness, appear to fit in this tradition. More recently, the *Wall Street Journal* ran the following headline and story:

Many Don't Realize It's Clinton's
Plan They Like

Jahan Bashir doesn't like President Clinton's health-care plan. She thinks it's too confusing, too complex and probably too expensive.

What about a plan that would guarantee a standard private health benefits package to all Americans, try to promote competition in the medical industry, include some government regulation to keep prices under control and require all employers to buy health insurance for their workers with the promise of government subsidies to help the smallest companies?

"It sounds good," says Mrs. Bashir, a 43-year-old secretary and mother of seven. "Employers may pick up a lot of the burden, but if the employer can't afford it, the government will subsidize. So you're going to have the employer, the government and the insurance companies working together."

Actually, that is the Clinton plan. . .

A new *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News poll shows that public support for "the Clinton

health plan" is eroding. Yet the same poll, conducted by Republican Robert Teeter and Democrat Peter Hart, shows that backing for the basic provisions in the president's plan is still strong. . . (March 10, 1994, p. 1B.)

This assertion of "false consciousness" departs from past uses of the term, since the *Wall Street Journal* is not predisposed to believe that the public most wants President Clinton's health plan. It does, however, fit a longstanding concern in quantitative opinion research. Bartels (1994) observes, "The political ignorance of the American voter is one of the best documented data of modern political science" (p. 1). Yet the consequences of that ignorance are by no means clear. Do citizens and voters manage, despite their ignorance, to use heuristic devices—such as parties, ideologies, and liked or disliked groups—to align themselves with the issues and candidates that best represent their true opinions (see, for example, Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Hurwitz and Peffley, 1987)? Or are they easily misled into endorsements they wouldn't make if better informed (see Bennett, 1989)?

Answering this question requires having some criterion for what people *would want if fully informed* that is independent of the preferences they express in ordinary circumstances. Several interesting approaches have been tried. One is the use of focus groups to measure political attitudes. I cannot speak confidently about focus groups. But, focus groups do try to get around the manifestly superficial responses made to survey questions in order to find out what people really think—or would really think if, as it is assumed they eventually will, they stop to think about it. Hence focus group leaders push, probe, and instigate discussion among their subjects, trying to find out which opinion statements will be defended, which will fall by the wayside, and where the center of opinion will finally appear.

The obvious danger of focus groups is that group leaders may, by their provocations, create opinions that would not

otherwise exist. Given this serious danger, the growing reliance on focus groups by campaign consultants and their client politicians indicates, if nothing else, that some of the most relentlessly practical people in the world are less than wholly impressed by the claims made on behalf of the standard opinion poll.

Widespread use of focus groups, however, proves only a concern that surveys fail to capture people's true opinions; it does not constitute evidence that they do. For such evidence, we must turn to conventional social scientific studies. Gelman and King (1993) ask, "Why Are American Presidential Election Campaign Polls So Variable When Votes are So Predictable?" The question is motivated by an accumulation of evidence that campaign polls, unless taken in close proximity to election day, poorly predict final outcomes.³ But statistical models do a very good job of forecasting presidential elections before campaigns begin. Perhaps the most striking instance of the unreliability of campaign polls occurred in 1988 when, in late summer, one poll found Michael Dukakis leading George Bush by 17 points. Yet at about the same time, Rosenstone's (1983) forecasting model correctly predicted the ultimate result, an easy victory for Bush, to within less than one percent of the actual result. Rosenstone's model is based on a handful of political and economic variables, including the condition of the national economy and the positions of the candidates on two broad issue dimensions. Discrepancies between polls of voter intentions and Rosenstone's and others' models are typically much smaller—in recent elections, about five percentage points—but the established forecasting models are always closer to the final mark, usually within one percent.

The most probable reason for the discrepancies, as Gelman and King argue, is that voters rely on campaigns to supply the information necessary to know what their preferences truly are. Lack of information does not prevent people

from stating preferences if a pollster should ask their opinion before the campaign starts, but it does prevent them from being very accurate about what they will ultimately do. Modelers, who need not rely on campaigns for relevant economic and political information and who have estimated how much weight voters typically give each type of information, can therefore easily outperform early campaign polls.

An implicit conclusion of Gelman and King is that the opinion that gets registered on election day is a reasonable approximation of the public's enlightened opinion but that early campaign polls are not. Bartels (1994), however, shows that even presidential election outcomes may fail to reveal enlightened opinion. In a straightforward if unusual use of multiple regression on survey data collected by the National Election Studies, Bartels estimates a presidential vote model in which each of 20 independent variables (for example, sex, race, income, and so forth) is separately interacted with political information. This enables him to find out whether, all else being equal, well-informed women vote differently from poorly informed women, well-informed blacks vote differently from poorly informed blacks, and so forth. What he finds is that, aggregating across all 20 variables, well-informed voters differ from their poorly informed counterparts by about 10 percentage points in their likelihood of supporting a Republican presidential candidate. (By way of evaluating this difference, Bartels notes that the difference between actual votes and 50 percent support for the Republican is about 20 percentage points; thus, average information levels in the electorate are such that voters manage to make up only half the distance between a coin toss and where they would be if highly informed.) There was some tendency for "incorrect" votes to cancel one another, but the canceling was not complete: In 1992, a fairly typical year, the overall vote was 2.7 percentage points more Republican than it

would have been if all voters had acted as their best informed counterparts had acted.

Bartels is careful not to equate a highly informed vote with an enlightened vote, since a high level of political information might function as a proxy for many things besides enlightenment. Still, information is one indicator of enlightenment, so his results do suggest the existence of an "important" gap between expressed and enlightened opinion.

How important is "important"? One answer is that the gaps disclosed by Bartels were large enough to sway close elections, which indicates considerable importance. But the gaps between expressed and enlightened opinion that appear in presidential elections are likely to be quite small relative to those that exist in other contexts, such as, for example, Clinton's health care program. The entire political communication system of the United States focuses for many weeks on elections, so that most voters get a good chance to figure out which candidate better represents their views. In the latter case—a type which arises virtually constantly rather than once every four years—citizens get much less information and have much less reason to pay close attention to it, so that many more are likely to express opinions that diverge from what they would think if fully informed.

If, as all this indicates, one should be suspicious of the authenticity of what surveys typically measure, one should also be suspicious of the opposite conclusion, that surveys are worthless. The same campaign consultants who conduct focus groups, for example, also spend millions of dollars each year conducting surveys both during election campaigns and between them. They do so because surveys contain real information about what the public thinks on important issues and how it thinks about them. Moreover, some "top-of-the-head" survey responses may be better indicators of authentic opinion than more considered responses, as experiments by the

psychologist Timothy Wilson and colleagues makes quite clear.

For example, Wilson gave college students a choice of several free posters of the type commonly hung in dorm rooms and student apartments. A random half was asked to articulate their reasons for liking or disliking a poster before making a choice of which poster to take home; the other students simply chose their most preferred poster in top-of-the-head fashion. Follow-up interviews several weeks later found that the students who analyzed their feelings before making choices were *less* likely to report satisfaction with their posters than were people who simply took the poster they liked.

Similar evidence of the "disruptive effects of thought" have been obtained in attitude reports concerning presidential candidates, strawberry jam, and even dating partners. In explaining these results, Wilson, Dunn, Kraft and Lisle (1989) argue that

when asked to explain their feelings, [people] do not always know exactly why they feel the way they do. Therefore, the reasons they come up with sound plausible, but might not correctly explain their feelings. . . . Unaware that their reasons are incomplete or incorrect, people view them as representative of their feelings and adopt the attitude they imply.

In the case of the posters, for example, students faced a choice between Impressionist paintings and humor posters (for example, a cat on a tightrope with the caption, "Gimme a break"). Students found it easy to articulate things they disliked about the Impressionist paintings (for example, fuzzy images) but easy to think up things they liked about the humor posters (for example, it's funny). So, following the logic of their own reasons, they often chose (and subsequently grew disenchanted with) a humor poster. Meanwhile, students in the control condition, arriving at evaluations by whatever off-hand means they normally do, overwhelmingly chose and were subse-

quently more satisfied with an Impressionist painting.

IV. PUBLIC OPINION AS LATENT OPINION

As indicated, Key (1961) defined public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed." He then introduced the concept of "latent opinion," which "in the practice of politics and government . . . is really about the only type of opinion that generates much anxiety" (p. 262). Key offered several understandings of the "singularly slippery" idea of latent opinion, but all reduced to essentially this: Latent opinion is opinion that *might* exist at the time of the next election and result in incumbent politicians being thrown out of office.

Key never entered the non-attitudes debate, nor had he any reason to, since "responses to survey questions" give no clue "as to the convertibility of opinion into votes." Hence,

if a legislator is to worry about the attitude of his district, what he needs really to worry about is, not whether his performance pleases the constituency at the moment, but what the response of his constituency will be in the next campaign when persons aggrieved by his position attack his record. The constituency, thus, acquires a sanction largely through those political instruments that assure a challenge of the record. In the large, that function is an activity of the minority party (p. 499).

Thus, the opinions that governments are prudent to heed may be total non-attitudes—and hence beyond the power of any survey to measure—at the moment an elite decision-maker must act. Contrary to Achen, this does not seem to vitiate the possibility of democracy. It simply places a heavy burden on politicians (and any academics interested in the role of public opinion in democracy) to be skilled at figuring out, presumably on the basis of how the public has reacted to past events and partisan challenges, how it will react to future ones.

No wonder, then, that Key believed that "to speak with precision about public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost" (p. 8). If anything, he underestimated the problem.

In contrast to other opinion constructs I examined, latent opinion did not arise from a need to account for problematic data. Indeed, it has no obvious connection to data at all. It is, however, very much a response to a problem—the substantive problem indicated in the title of Key's book, *Public Opinion and American Democracy*. Key is relentless in his efforts to come to grips with the particular form of public opinion that affects what government does. Unlike the quantitative modelers who came after him and now dominate the study of public opinion, he was committed to pursuing it even into domains where no quantification was yet possible.⁴ His empirically disconnected but politically relevant construction of public opinion reflects that commitment.

In his political biography of President John Kennedy (1992), Richard Reeves never mentions latent opinion. But Reeves provides compelling empirical evidence of latent opinion when he depicts a man living in constant fear of how his Republican opponent in the next election might attack him. With the McCarthyist fifties still fresh in memory, many of Kennedy's fears centered on Vietnam:

[Kennedy] told [Walt] Rostow he did not need stacks of memos to understand political consequences, that was his business. American withdrawal [from Vietnam] would destroy him and the Democratic party in a replay of the "Who Lost China?" debate in the early 1950s. . . .

But Kennedy would not yet decide [to pull out or escalate]. The domestic political consequences were too much to risk, and he knew what would happen if he gave the military a go-ahead on combat troops. . . . "They [the military] want a force of American troops. . . . It's like taking a drink. The effect wears off, and you have to take another." (p. 262)

That evening over a drink, Kennedy brought up Vietnam again with Charlie Bartlett: "We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. Those people hate us. They are going to throw our asses out of there at almost any point. But I can't give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and then get the American people to re-elect me. . . ." (484).

Politically, he could not afford to look weak militarily. Whatever he truly thought . . . about the commitment of Americans on the ground in Asia, he was not ready, as he had told CBS only a month before, to be accused of losing Vietnam to the Communists, as other American politicians had only ten years before been accused of losing China to the Communists, and had been destroyed (p. 604).

Although Kennedy feared the public would punish him for "losing Vietnam," he also feared electoral retribution if he undertook a war to save it. As he told a confidant in another context, "we all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow" (p. 416). So Kennedy, and President Lyndon Johnson after him, followed a risky temporizing policy in Vietnam, making military commitments big enough to prevent outright loss but not big enough to stabilize an anti-communist government. But if the public was likely to punish a president who either started a land war in Asia or "lost" any part of Asia to communism, it may have been the least risky of his options. Both Kennedy and Johnson have often been accused of bungling the Vietnam issue. What has less often been noted is that their policies made political sense from a not implausible reading of what public opinion would reward or punish at the next election.

Hansen (1992), and Zaller (1994) represent, in different ways, more rigorous attempts to study the influence process.

Hansen's study, *Gaining Access: Congress and the Farm Lobby, 1919–1981*, focuses on the development and over-time fluctuation of the influence of the farm lobby on the U.S. Congress. His starting point is the need of members of Con-

gress to get themselves re-elected under conditions of uncertainty:

They aim to be on the right side of an issue in the *next* election, but they lack information about what the relevant rewards, the future rewards, will be. A popular stand now is no guarantee a popular and salient stand later (p. 17).

As a Congressman cited by Hansen says, "You must be as smart in prospect as they [the voters] are in retrospect." This is no easy task. Issues and constituencies, though stable much of the time, can change drastically and without notice, and when they do, the politician on the wrong side of current concerns can be in deep trouble.

To deal with this uncertainty, members of Congress are willing to take advice and assistance from anyone who can reliably give it. Interest groups are one place they turn. But simply the existence of interest groups and their desire to influence policy is no guarantee that members of Congress will listen to them. Representatives must be persuaded that the interest group is purveying accurate information about the preferences of constituents who vote those preferences at the polls, and also that the constituents will continue to vote those preferences over time. To use Hansen's terms, interest groups must, if they wish to be influential, give advice that confers competitive electoral advantage, and they must do so with respect to an issue that will be expected to recur in future elections. Hansen shows that the initial development of and subsequent fluctuation in the influence of farm lobbies accords closely with these theoretical presuppositions.

I (1994) show how public opinion affected decision-making on the Gulf war. My methodology was weak—mainly interviews with staff aides to key politicians. But my conclusions were provocative: that Bush had reason to fear electoral punishment if he accepted the annexation of Kuwait by Iraq, that it was

politically prudent for Bush to launch the war without waiting to see the effects of economic sanctions. Furthermore, Congressional Democrats, in offering little more than token opposition to Bush's policies, were responding to the difficulty of getting a clear reading of future opinion. If Bush launched a war and the U.S. won with minimal cost, Democrats would be better off having offered only token opposition. And if Bush launched a war that turned out badly, Democrats would have plenty of time before the next election to pillory him over it. Hence, for a Democrat concerned about latent opinion, the imperative was to keep a low profile and see how events played out.

V. CONCLUSIONS

None of the alternative constructions of public opinion outlined in this essay has any claim to general superiority. The first, which regards public opinion as the aggregation of responses to survey questions, has provided a useful basis for studies of a wide variety of topics, some of which are congenial to the political establishment (for example, why citizens vote) and some of which are not (for example, how elites manipulate public opinion). Many of these studies are, by my lights, notable for both rigor and inherent interest. Political relevance, however, is often a matter of concern. Here Key's concept of public opinion, defined in terms of political relevance, ranks much better. But studying latent opinion in an empirically rigorous fashion remains, as Key himself was the first to point out, a daunting problem, "like coming to grips with the Holy Ghost." Even the notoriously difficult concept of enlightened opinion may be more susceptible to systematic research.

Most future research will likely continue to use the currently dominant construct of mass opinion, simply because this construct is most amenable to systematic study. But research inspired by alter-

native conceptions of the nature of public opinion is likely to become more common, especially if, as some of the research I have reviewed indicates, it can be done in an empirically compelling fashion.

NOTES

¹For an historical overview of alternative constructs, see Price (1992).

²Achen's claim that "measurement error" is just as prevalent among the sophisticated was subsequently refuted.

³Polls taken immediately before a presidential election are generally very accurate; the legendary case of polling error occurred in 1948, when interviewing stopped several weeks before the election, thereby missing Truman's last minute rally.

⁴Key took his Ph.D in the political science department at the University of Chicago, which pioneered quantification in political science, and was himself a leading and unusually gifted quantifier. Great talent in the analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data unfortunately remains as rare in our own day as in Key's.

Deconstructing "Attitude Structure" in Public Opinion Studies

FREDERICK SCHIFF

Public opinion studies are based on a mass society model in which individuals are separate, isolated social beings with direct, simultaneous relations to the institutions of the larger society unmediated by intervening social networks.¹ In his classic formulation, Kornhauser (1959) stressed the decline in influence of intervening social networks (neighborhoods, families, voluntary affiliations, and so forth). He also pointed to the unmediated access of elites to the masses (nowa-

days by manipulation, propaganda and management techniques enhanced through broadcasting, advertising and public relations), and the direct access of the masses to elites (notably through "mass feedback technologies" like public opinion polling and market research). Beniger (1987) argues that this model dominated the field of public opinion studies from the 1940s into the 1960s. Despite more recent reformulations, researchers who study public opinion (as opposed to elite opinion) and mass media returned to the mass society model in the late 1980s. The ramifications of the model are methodological as well as substantive, as Beniger (p. 549) says: "Mass society assumptions [about an audience composed of separate individu-

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