Mediated Politics

COMMUNICATION IN THE FUTURE OF DEMOCRACY

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CHAPTER 10

Reframing Public Opinion as We Have Known It

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The continuing controversies over media effects on public opinion and democracy can be traced in part to uncertainties about what public opinion is. "Public opinion" is a useful fiction that actually refers to several distinct phenomena, many of them crucially shaped by the current media system. The process of framing – selecting, highlighting, and sorting into a coherent narrative some facts or observations and deleting many others – is critical to the formation of this convenient fiction. Yet the framing process could be altered dramatically by new channels and processes of mediated communication. If that happens, public opinion as we have known it will likely be transformed, altering the way democracy has (imperfectly) worked since mass media became central to its operation. We shall differentiate *public opinion*, by which we mean the loose, usually undefined, and thoroughly protean term used by just about everyone from academics to journalists to citizens and politicans, from four referents that we define more precisely. Once we understand these distinctions we can understand better how *current* mass media influence politics, and how well the public gets represented in a democratic political process shaped by the traditional mass media. Profound changes in the media system now underway demand both far greater conceptual clarity and creative new means of getting at the theoretical concerns that underlie social scientists' longstanding attention to the role of public opinion in democracy.

Those invoking public opinion seem usually to mean the *comprehensive preferences of the majority of individuals on an issue.* (Sometimes they also refer to the other side, to a single minority preference on the issue.) That is, observers imply or say that the majority would gain subjective utility if a particular policy were enacted or candidate elected. By "comprehensive preferences" we mean that most assertions about public

opinion imply that a majority of Americans actually would prefer, say, a balanced budget amendment to the U.S. Constitution taking into account all other possible policy outcomes. There are many well-known problems with the assumptions built into such readings of the public's sentiments. Among the sources of these uncertainties are measurement problems, contradictions in beliefs, sentiments based in debatable perceptions that with alteration might change radically, aggregation dilemmas (i.e., the indeterminacy of majority opinion as soon as we consider trade-offs among more than two issues at the same time),[1] and nonattitudes (i.e., the absence of real opinions about many issues).

This is not to say that individuals don't have real (if perhaps evanescent) preferences, but discovering what they are and what they'd be with altered information, distinguishing real ones from nonattitudes and erroneously measured ones, determining trade-offs and then aggregating them into a useful summary characterization require selecting aspects of reality and ignoring many others – or framing (Entman 1993). When people invoke public opinion, then, they selectively highlight some elements of the difficult-to-know reality of individuals' thinking and omit lots of others. The current media system, because it gathers elites and mass publics into a common information space that largely highlights and repeats the same themes, facilitates this framing process and thus a sense that public opinion is a meaningful concept.

Yet a fair reading of all the survey evidence on any issue most often yields a shrug of the shoulders. Consider the balanced budget. In a March 1995 ABC/Washington Post survey, respondents' support for a budget-balancing amendment to the U.S. Constitution was premised on one condition: that it not lead to cuts in Social Security. Nearly 80 percent favored the amendment, but eight in ten respondents also rejected the idea that balancing the budget would require Social Security cuts; a smaller majority, 58 percent, said tax increases wouldn't be necessary either. If it came to a choice, 72 percent said protecting Social Security was more important than balancing the budget. Did public opinion favor the balanced budget amendment or not? Events between 1995 and 1998 reveal that it *was* necessary to raise taxes to balance the budget (at least if we wanted to by 1998 or any foreseeable future). Does that mean public opinion in March 1995 actually opposed a balanced budget? Or that if asked in 1998, a majority of Americans would have preferred at that time to repeal the Bush and Clinton tax increases (mostly on the rich) rather than putting up with the budget being balanced that year – and with attendant benefits such as low mortgage and unemployment rates?

Another example comes from the prewar debate on Iraq in 1990. As Mueller (1994, p. 82) writes:

> While it is possible to argue from some data that there was something of a movement toward greater hawkishness during this period, other data indicate something of a movement toward dovishness, and there are considerable data to suggest that there was no change at all.

Mueller's book-length study documents that the looming and then ongoing war was subjected to perhaps the most intense, even fulsome, public opinion surveying of any short-term policy issue ever. Yet Mueller shows that the total does not yield a clear picture of real public desires or even a clear survey majority prior to the war.

We cannot know public opinion definitively, via either surveys or other forms of evidence, which are at least as problematic and subject to framing. But this doesn't mean the opinions of ordinary members of the public are irrelevant to the democratic process, or that media have no real influence on them. We identify four referents of the term public opinion. They are more consistently knowable, they are influenced by mass media, and they affect government.

As preface: We are not arguing that mediated politics caused certain referents or types of public opinion to appear on the American political scene, but simply that mediated politics valorizes some meanings of public opinion over others. Many of the referents we discuss in the next section have long been found in political discourse – before the age of broadcast media, for example. Yet they appear, disappear, and reappear when they are deemed useful by powerful institutions and actors (on the historical contingency of public opinion referents, see Habermas 1989 or Herbst 1993).

REFERENTS OF PUBLIC OPINION

The four referents of public opinion are not, by any means, the only possible forms public opinion might take within the context of public discourse and policy making. And this simple four-fold classification does not reflect the long intellectual history of combat over the meaning of public opinion (see Herbst 1993). Yet for the purposes of under-

standing the ways public opinion is evoked at the end of the twentieth century, in national policy debates and legislative action, delineating these four forms of public opinion proves illuminating.

Mass Opinion

The first form of public opinion is *mass opinion.* This is the aggregation or summation of individual preferences as tabulated through opinion polls, referenda, or elections. It is simply the "will of all" that Rousseau wrote about in *The Social Contract* (1762): the result of adding citizen opinions together, regardless of how informed or tightly held these beliefs happen to be. Mass opinion is vital to a democracy, as Rousseau knew and as we today know. There are times when policy issues are fairly straightforward and a simple query to the public about its preferences yields a useful aggregate. One instance is capital punishment. This is a topic about which most people appear to have strong and consistent opinions: Most citizens have wrestled with the topic and really do know how they feel. Yet, most issues are unlike this: They are fluid social, economic, and political problems far from most persons' confident grasp. They may opine so forcefully and confidently on capital punishment because crime and punishment are something they feel they understand, that they are or could be close to. But to voice preferences on the Israeli-Palestinian question or Social Security demands a fairly intricate and historically informed sort of political knowledge. So mass opinion is useful in some instances, when details are within the comprehension of most, but on many other issues, lack of understanding about all aspects of the issue prevents typical citizens from producing a considered opinion.

Some have argued for *low information rationality* (Popkin 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998), noting that mass opinion – the opinions we get from polling, for example – is useful because people need very few cues to produce a rational opinion or an opinion that reflects their own interests. This paradigm has many appeals, but its deficiencies outweigh them, including its lack of much empirical support. Few who care about democracy, who believe that citizens should be engaged in discourse and in the policy-making process, should be happy with low information rationality. Yes, people get cues from elites about which way to lean when casting a vote or deciding between two crude alternatives. But one cannot become an educated and subtle-minded citizen in any democracy by remaining mostly ignorant and taking cues from political parties or elites whom they seem to agree with.

Mass opinion, then, is problematic because it is not informed opinion. There are, undoubtedly, many respondents in a typical opinion poll who are the kinds of citizens we applaud in democratic theorizing – well-informed, motivated to learn about policy, and engaged in argumentation with friends, neighbors, and colleagues. But most respondents are not "ideal" citizens, and indeed the uneven information levels among citizens skew results of opinion polls – chief indicators of mass opinion – in significant and troubling ways (Althaus 1998). Most worrisome is that mass opinion, because it is not typically reflective of thoughtful, informed citizen preferences (polls, for example, are often brief or conducted before extended public debate has occurred) are quite malleable. The media, in particular, have great ability to shape mass opinion through framing issues in particular ways, limiting certain types of information in their reporting on public affairs, and the like. We now have decades of research that demonstrate how media influence mass opinion, but it is important to keep in mind that mass opinion can be swayed because it is – at base and in the main – unstable and superficial.

Activated Public Opinion

The second type of public opinion of import here is what we call *activated public opinion.* These are the opinions of engaged, informed, and organized citizens – those who are mobilizable during campaign periods and between elections as well. Political science tells us who these citizens are: party loyalists, local community activists, interest group spokespersons, opinion leaders, and others who pay close attention to the political realm. Policy makers have long heeded activated public opinion because it is the public opinion that matters most often in day-to-day policy making, as empirical research has begun to demonstrate (Herbst 1998a; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000). Indeed, Herbert Blumer (1948) argued that mass opinion is not particularly useful because it ignores the sociological truth about politics: People with power and resources, closely engaged in politics, compose the public opinion that matters. Blumer argued fiercely against the interchangeability of mass opinion (polling data) and public opinion, because he believed that they were far from synonymous if we are to describe political reality.

Interestingly, the media are not as influential on the politically engaged because they have strong opinions, formed with consideration and tied to coherent and deeply felt ideology. Unlike mass opinion, which is more likely swayed by the mass media, highly educated and

engaged citizens are most often resistant to messages that run counter to their belief systems very much in the ways that Klapper (1960) first wrote about selective exposure and retention of media content. On one level, and from the perspective of democratic theory, the fact that citizens in this group resist (and indeed argue with) media content coming into their living rooms is comforting: These are people who know how they feel and hold tight to their preferences. Yet, the citizens who fit under the category of activated public opinion are small in number, as we have known for some time now (e.g., Converse 1964). The ideal public sphere would be teeming with active citizens, but at the close of the twentieth century, the United States and other industrialized democracies were far from Jürgen Habermas's (1989) ideal state of public communication.

Latent Public Opinion

The third category is what V. O. Key called *latent public opinion* (Key 1961; Zaller 1998) – the fundamental public preferences that underlie more fleeting and superficial opinions we find when conducting polls of the mass public. Latent opinion, in short, is where public opinion will "end up" after a policy debate has progressed or what people truly feel beneath all the chaos and shifting opinion we see in the heat of democratic practice. The most successful leaders are those who can sense latent opinion – who understand the dynamics of public opinion beneath the discursive chaos. In the nineteenth century, for example, party bosses were excellent at sensing latent opinion (see Herbst 1993). They had such a thorough understanding of public preferences, gained through sustained political experience and close contact with constituents, that they could predict with some accuracy where – at the end of the day – public opinion would be. Key knew that latent opinion was difficult to measure, but he also understood, in ways that have been lost in the political science literature (see Zaller 1998), that this form of opinion was different from mass opinion and mattered quite a lot in the policy-making process. From our perspective, it is likely that the effective politician measures latent opinion – perhaps the most important form of public opinion – through multiple venues: mass opinion measures (polls), activated opinion, communication with colleagues, experience in politics, and – most nebulously – an instinct for what his or her constituencies truly value. One might argue, in fact, that if a leader understands the latter – the fundamental, core values of majorities – he or she can ignore opinion polls and other superficial measures

of public opinion altogether. A dangerous game, no doubt, but tempting in an age when polls conflict, survey response rates drop, and people remain as uninformed about politics as ever.

Perceived Majorities

The final referent that observers who invoke public opinion may wittingly or unwittingly be describing is *perceived majorities.* Perceived majorities are the perceptions held by most observers, including journalists, politicians, and members of the public themselves, of where the majority of the public stands on an issue. This is the convenient fiction observers use to characterize the comprehensive preferences of a majority of citizens despite all the problems we've seen in accepting any such summary labels as valid. Media may not affect the *actual* sentiments of individual citizens. And those sentiments may typically be more complicated or superficial or volatile than suggested by confident descriptions of what "the American people believe" or "the public demands." Still, news reports do shape the majority opinions that are widely *perceived* to exist. By helping to form these perceived majorities, a kind of reification of public opinion (Herbst 1993, p. 46; cf. Lippmann 1925 and Bordieu 1979) media reports may affect the actions of governing elites and perhaps the other aspects of public opinion (i.e., mass opinion, activated opinion, and latent opinion). If the media keep asserting that the public holds a particular view, the resulting perceptions of public desires – perceived majorities – can shape actual behavior by government and citizens. Many of the strategic campaigns described by Bennett and Manheim in Chap. 13 are designed to influence, or actually influence, perceived majorities rather than mass opinion itself.

Congruence between the majority sentiments widely perceived to exist and those that actually obtain (insofar as we can know them) is best conceived as a variable. For example, during most of the Reagan administration, media were replete with assertions of his great popularity with Americans. Yet presidential approval polls during his first term actually made him the least popular president, on average, since systematic polling began (King and Schudson 1991). Nonetheless, the widely shared perception of Reagan as massively popular bolstered his political clout. Politicians and journalists frequently ignore survey results in characterizing public opinion, in part because the data are often so contradictory and in part because neglecting polls is strategically useful. Since they can usually find some poll somewhere that backs

their preferred reading of majority sentiment, elites typically just sound off about what the people allegedly believe. Significant political capital goes into the contest among politicians and groups to induce the media to depict majority opinion in desired ways. A 1998 survey of Congress members ($n = 81$), presidential appointees ($n = 98$), and Senior Executive Service workers ($n = 151$) (Pew 1998) suggests that such investments of political energy in shaping media depictions of public opinion are indeed worthwhile. The survey found that news media reports rather than polls provide the most important source for executive branch elites' perceptions of "public opinion."

Why are typologies of public opinion referents useful to scholars? For one thing, these typologies underscore the dynamic nature of discourse about public opinion. As Habermas has so clearly demonstrated, public opinion is a moving, historically situated target, and our language for discussing it must therefore be complex, subtle, and exacting. Typologies enable scholars to discern which referent is being used by a particular actor or institution, and also force us to ask why others are inappropriate or are ignored. Second, political actors themselves hold varied meanings of public opinion in their heads, simultaneously, so even in the unlikely event that scholars could come to consensus on a meaning of public opinion, real political actors could not and would not (see Herbst 1998). Finally, if we are ever to trace the impact or impotence of public opinion in politics, we can only do so by looking for its multiple forms. If we stay focused on only one referent or way of defining public opinion, we miss others and therefore miss their effects on the political process.

REPRESENTATION OF PUBLIC OPINION

Exactly how can the aforementioned conceptual distinctions enhance understanding of public opinion and democracy? In this section we illustrate the usefulness by focusing on the representation of public opinion, specifically with respect to defense spending. Recently the dominant trend in scholarly discussions has been to offer optimistic readings of how well public opinion is represented in U.S. democracy. We suggest that such complaisant interpretations of public opinion's putatively powerful impacts require further specification and qualification in light of our distinctions.

To come up with a reading of public opinion requires *framing*, that is, selecting and highlighting some elements of alleged public sentiments while neglecting other elements. As we wrote in the first section, on most public policy issues there is no determinate public opinion; what scholars are really talking about when they probe the representation of public opinion is *mass opinion*. The framing process that produces mass opinion is a product of both strategic and haphazard interactions among media, government, events, and pollsters. Executive branch and congressional party leaders seek to dominate mass opinion (and its perception by others with political power) by trying to impose their framing of public opinion on media coverage. In a somewhat analogous way, scholars claiming to represent public opinion through their research data and analyses also engage in framing. Since they have no way of truly capturing public thinking in all its dimensions, they actually employ selected aspects of public sentiment captured by polls – they use mass opinion as a surrogate for public opinion, and this creates difficulties for empirical theory and normative judgment.

There are numerous studies in political science that choose a particular referent for public opinion – often the aggregation of individual opinions – and then draw conclusions about broad opinion dynamics from there, building theory about democratic practice. For example, in their important work on the relationship between public opinion and public policy directions, Page and Shapiro (1992) rely solely on survey data as referent of public opinion. This is justifiable given the focus of their argument, but does mean that other forms or referents of public opinion that fail to influence policy or influence it in entirely different ways than aggregate opinion are omitted. For this essay, we'd like to examine another study – the influential article on representation of public opinion in defense policy by Thomas Hartley and Bruce Russett (1992). They link normative democratic theory with empirical data to ask "Who governs military spending in the United States?" They answer that "public opinion" helps "govern." Hartley and Russett's study (cf. Bartels 1991) demonstrates the difficulty of reaching such a conclusion; for, despite their creativity, the authors neglect problems of measurement, causality, and variation. We cannot conclude, as these authors do, that the public consistently exerts significant independent impact over foreign and defense policy makers. If much of the public opinion to which these authors say officials respond is actually mass opinion, then we may not have much of an empirical basis for inferring anything definitive about which way the power flows. A close examination of this research is worthwhile because it typifies the dominant, sanguine thrust in empirical studies of public opinion and democracy toward the end

of the century. It exemplifies the problems that arise when the conceptual complexities of measuring and understanding public opinion are too readily passed over.

The study finds that between 1965 and 1990, "changes in public opinion consistently exert an effect on changes in military spending." (Hartley and Russett 1992, p. 905). It measures public opinion by responses to a single, repeatedly used survey question: whether government is spending too little, too much, or about the right amount on defense. Changes in the levels of too little (or too much) responses significantly predict alteration in the total defense obligations Congress approves (p. 907). On this basis Hartley and Russett argue that, judging by the case of defense spending, Congress is responsive to public opinion, fulfilling its representative duties according to at least one reasonable version of democracy. In essence, Russett and Hartley claim that the large increases in defense spending of those years were *responses to independent changes in the defense policy preferences that led to a majority of Americans favoring higher spending.* To assess the findings and inferences here, we focus on the period encompassing the Carter and Reagan administrations (1977–89), which saw the widest swings in public sentiment and thus the best opportunity for congressional responsiveness, although similar arguments could be made for the Johnson and Nixon years.

The Hartley–Russett piece, like most in this realm, neglects the many imperfections of survey research in practice and even in theory as a means of discerning individuals' genuine beliefs and preferences (Schuman and Presser 1981; Zaller 1992). It also passes over the difficulties of aggregating individual responses to identify a singular public opinion. We know that surveys through the 1970s and 1980s registered consistent support for higher levels of government services *and* lower taxes *and* lower deficits. What is the real public opinion to which Congress should or could have responded? Indeed, in this case as in most, we cannot even determine a clear mass opinion, let alone true preference rankings and preferred trade-offs. As Bartels (1991, p. 466) notes, there were simultaneous public demands for "social programs, tax reduction, and fiscal responsibility," which "manifestly limited the ability of Congress to respond to each of them separately." In this sense, it would appear nearly arbitrary to pick one dimension where mass opinion and Congressional action coincide, while neglecting others where they did not and draw any general conclusions on government responsiveness.

On some issues, the aggregate of the public's responses to polls – mass opinion – can be quite stable over many years. But mass opinion on any *specific* proposal is usually measured when it is politically relevant, such as during an election or a congressional vote. This point highlights the limitation of the Yankelovich theory (cf. Page and Shapiro 1992), that public opinion may be ignorant and volatile when an issue first emerges but then matures and settles down as the public in aggregate has a chance to learn and deliberate. For political purposes, in the typical case the public may not have enough time to deliberate, because the government has moved on to new issues before sufficient time has passed. What we usually get in polls is opinion at the early stage, when the public's answers are most unstable and susceptible to framing effects. In any case, though mass opinion might consistently back, say, a balanced budget and lower taxes, the relevance and congruence of these apple pie generalities to specific policy proposals before legislatures, executive agencies, and courts is usually problematic. Making them line up, for example, by claiming a particular law fulfills majority preferences, requires framing: selecting some manifestations of public sentiment and some elements of the law, and ignoring many others.

It seems difficult to justify selecting one strain of opinion tapped by the single defense spending question, while ignoring the indubitable failure of Congress to respond to other strains. Congress failed to insist that Reagan approach nuclear negotiations seriously in his first term (see Talbott 1984 on Reagan's negotiating approach), let alone to approve a nuclear freeze. Yet surveys showed the majorities favoring such action, often by upward of 75 percent (Entman and Rojecki 1993). If, reversing the Hartley–Russett approach, one used the survey data only on the nuclear freeze while ignoring the data on defense spending, one might well conclude Congress was entirely unresponsive to the public in the defense policy area.

Most noticeable in this period is the lack of representation from 1982 to 1985, when Congress raised defense spending despite the sharp dovish turn in mass opinion. Surveyed sentiment shifted even more sharply away from defense spending during this time than it had turned toward support between 1977 and 1981, so if Congress was responsive to altered public sentiment, we would expect a cut in defense by 1982 or 1983. Yet defense spending began declining in real terms only in *fiscal 1990.* Consider Figure 10.1, showing spending and survey results for 1980–90. Defense allocations kept growing as public support declined.

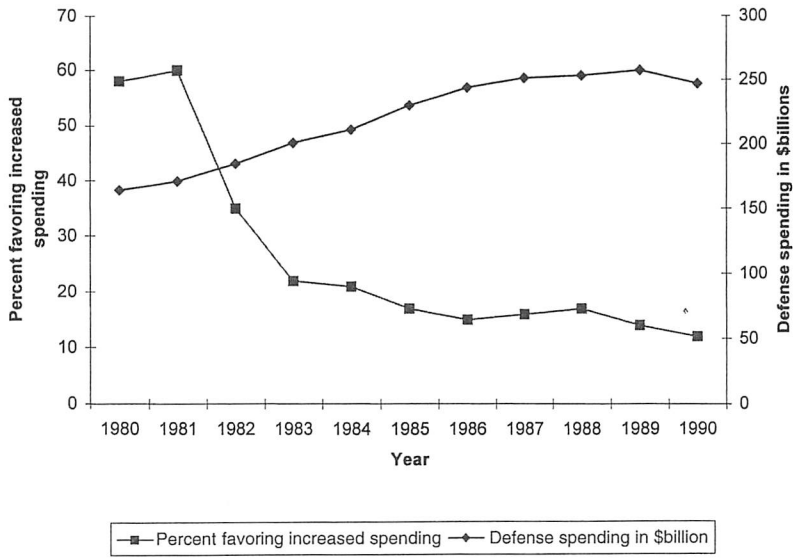

Figure 10.1. Surveyed public support for defense spending drops as spending increases. *Source*: Historical tables, *Budget of the United States Government, Fiscal 1992*, pp. 69–70; constant 1982 dollars. Survey data from Hartley and Russett.

The *rate* of growth in spending began slowing notably in fiscal 1987 (Entman and Rojecki 1993), which might have been a response to perceived majorities. But counting decisions that persist for eight years (1982–89) against both the overall dovish *movement* in opinion and the dovish *plurality* as "democratic responsiveness" would stretch most theories of democracy, including Hartley and Russett's, beyond recognition. To be sure, one major reason for continued budget growth during this period is that long-term commitments to weapons systems had been made in previous years (rarely does Congress stop after paying for half a submarine or bomber). More important, spending momentum is reinforced by electoral incentives in specific Congressional districts where military spending is more than a pork barrel and more like a lifeline; their representatives often exert disproportionate influence over defense budgets. But these points only underscore the complexity of generalizing about government responsiveness to public opinion.

Further, although surveys did not ask, surely few Americans preferred defense money to be spent with poor congressional analysis and oversight, by a Pentagon bureaucracy ill-prepared to handle rapid growth and tending to place first priority on turf and prestige rather than on securing the most effective national defense. Yet Congress did allow bureaucratic mismanagement to flourish, as the Pentagon procurement scandal and many studies of noncriminal behavior confirm – not to mention Congressional deliberation on specific projects suffused with pork barrel and logrolling considerations (see Stubbing 1986). Unless we classify only positive acts, not failures to act (or act responsibly), as part of the legislative response, Congress's neglect of careful analysis and oversight suggests a lack of responsiveness to public desires.

Beyond this, available data cannot tell us whether the public wanted the magnitude of increase approved by Congress during the 1980s. A much smaller increase might have been enough to satisfy most Americans. This seems especially likely in view of many other poll findings, some from the very surveys on "more" or "less" government spending that Hartley and Russett use, of large majorities desiring higher budgets for crime fighting, education, health care, or other domestic priorities (Page and Shapiro 1992, Chaps. 2, 4). For example, in 1982 the net polling position (percentage saying "cut back" spending subtracted from that saying "expand") was +52 percent for education, +43 percent for Social Security, and –10 percent for defense (Rielly 1991, p. 11). If respondents had been asked questions directly posing trade-offs (e.g., Would you like to have a 3-percent increase on defense and 3-percent on education and environment, or a 6-percent increase on defense and nothing on education and environment?), majorities even during the most hawkish years might well have favored a much lower defense increase than occurred.

In relying on some poll evidence to conclude that the public really preferred to raise defense spending as much as Congress did, instead of alternative uses of the money, then, scholars must ignore much other polling data. Include all the information at once and the notion of an identifiable public opinion (or "popular will," using Riker's term) dissolves – except as a convenient fiction for political strategists. The cyclical majority problem means that a majority might prefer *a* to *b* and *c* (say, defense spending increases to education increases and tax cuts), but a majority composed of different people might prefer *b* to *a* and *c* (i.e., education over the other two), and a still differently composed majority

might most prefer *c* (tax cuts). The cycle goes around with no "correct" resolution. The decision among the three is determined by the structure of political rules and strategic interaction of decision makers, most importantly the framing of the choices so that a particular dimension of the trade-off is highlighted and others repressed (Riker 1986). Acknowledging this requires a far more circumscribed understanding of democratic responsiveness than invoked by Hartley and Russett and many others, including Zaller in Chap. 12, who write on public opinion and democracy. The larger point is that public opinion includes a variety of individual preferences and intensities, contradictions and harmonies, which are varyingly susceptible to measurement and aggregation (cf. Herbst 1993, 1998b; see Page and Shapiro 1992, pp. 263–74 on the twists and turns in public and elite opinion). As for measuring government response, aside from whatever Congress as a whole decided, the degree to which individual legislators were responding to mass opinion also varied from member to member. Many voting for increased spending had long propagated alarmist readings of Soviet intentions and thus "responded" to mass opinion or activated public opinion they helped engender, while others more genuinely responded, voting for more spending than they seemed to prefer personally (Bartels 1991).

In this jumbled spiral, this double helix, of reciprocal influences, movements, and resistances among elites and mass public, empirical research should at the minimum recognize that neither the public's actual individual preferences nor mass opinion registered in surveys change entirely independently. To their credit, Hartley and Russett do raise the possibility that public opinion is a dependent variable, but they conclude that changes in defense spending do not cause parallel changes in opinion. Hence, they argue, public opinion is an independent causal force shaping defense policy. However, their failure to detect a statistical relationship between actual level of defense spending and the public's preferred defense budgetary direction raises an important puzzle. It would be difficult to understand, let alone represent, a citizenry that remained indifferent to current levels of defense spending when deciding whether budgets should increase or decrease. The poll response itself could not be interpreted – a "too little" or a "too much" response would appear meaningless – if we assume respondents do not know or assess current spending levels. Yet just such a disengaged public and empty survey responses are implied if we accept Hartley and Russett's finding that spending levels have no influence on mass opinion. Thus, in discussing the representation by government of public

Table 10.1. *Surveyed opinion on defense spending increases and number of Soviet threat stories*

Year	Percent favor more spending	Number of USSR threat stories
1977	33	149
1978	37	176
1979	40	232
1980	58	527
1981	60	385
1982	35	305
1983	22	432
1984	21	212
1985	17	186
1986	15	170
1987	16	211
1988	17	154
1989	14	103
1990	12	139

Source: Hartley and Russett (Percent favor more spending); Analysis by authors of *Washington Post* coverage (Number of USSR threat stories).

opinion, the dilemma of causality cannot be neglected: Where did the opinions aggregated into the public opinion come from? In fact, the degree of Soviet threat represented in the mass media corresponds closely to the movement of mass opinion. The data displayed in Table 10.1 result from searching all *Washington Post* stories, beginning in 1977 when computer archives were first available, where the words "Russia" or "Soviet" were juxtaposed within twenty-five words of the words aggression, buildup, or threat. Each story was checked to ensure the assertions containing the terms did refer to the USSR's actions or intentions (spending opinion data from Hartley and Russett 1990, p. 909). The relationship also graphs nicely, as shown in Figure 10.2.

The correlation is quite high for this kind of research (Pearson's $r = 0.69$, $p < 0.01$), and the measure is not even very refined. With enough searching and fine tuning one could probably come up with a media statistic that matched the movement of public opinion even more precisely.[2] Indeed, if the media measure were entered into the Hartley–Russett calculations and the survey data omitted, one might conclude

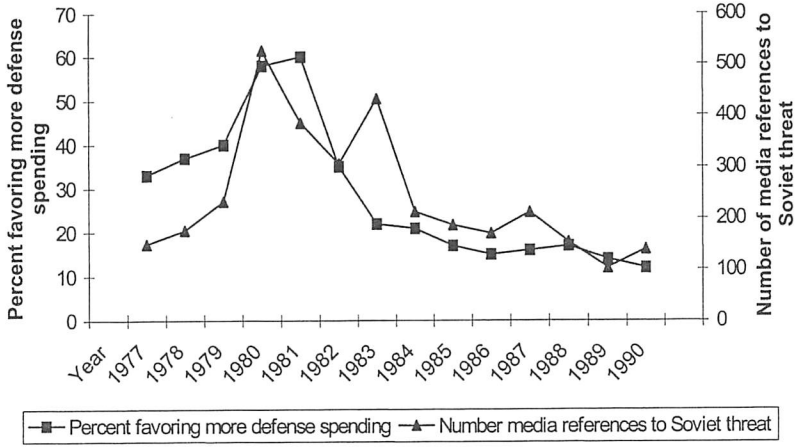

Figure 10.2. Surveyed opinion parallels media references to Soviet threat. *Source*: Hartley and Russett (Percent favoring more defense spending); analysis by the authors of *Washington Post* coverage (Media references to Soviet threats).

that Congress is highly responsive to *media images* rather than to public opinion. Our purpose is not to argue that position, but rather to emphasize the usefulness of distinguishing among different referents of public opinion for grasping the intermingling, simultaneous forces shaping both public sentiments and government decisions.

On balance, it appears unwarranted for Hartley and Russett to assert that their results offer "strong evidence" that public opinion exerts independent influence over policy (pp. 911–12), and thus that "institutions that maintain public control over government" are not "losing their efficacy." To have "strong" evidence for public *control*, research would have to show that mass opinion not only influences but is independent of elite pronouncements, government policy, and media messages. To supplement the terminology of independence and control, and the statistical methods implied by the terms, research should begin exploring the possibility of a public and government locked in interdependent embrace (cf. Jacobs and Shapiro 1992 for further consideration of this issue for the Johnson administration). Untangling the relationships here is enormously difficult: Perceived public sentiments are influenced by elites and policy; all three influence and are influenced by media; and

obtainable measures of elite and mass opinion, of policy, and of media content are deeply problematic. Short of acknowledging and probing this complexity, evidence for the independent influence of public opinion on policy, or for democratic control of government by the public, is likely to fall short.

The dramatic divergence between surveyed opinion and public policy during most of the 1980s suggests the need to develop more inclusive models that can explain the many spells of clear unresponsiveness as well as those that seem to indicate responsiveness, the episodes where mass opinion changes independent of elite information blitzes and the instances where Americans seem either to voice eager support of the White House or remain quiescent despite government policy that violates their expressed policy desires. Public opinion – actually, mass opinion – appears to be a sporadic constraint, not a controlling force to which government develops any kind of one-to-one correspondence. Meanwhile, greater attention should be paid to the impacts of activated opinion and perceived majorities in reinforcing policy choices that, like the defense spending hikes of the 1980s, clash with indicators of mass opinion.

ENHANCED STUDY OF PUBLIC OPINION

With the example of defense spending, and in light of our earlier critique of public opinion research, it might seem that we are arguing against the usefulness of surveying. We are not, and to disregard survey methodology as a way of sensing *some aspect* of public opinion would be wrongheaded. The challenge to opinion researchers is to discern the conditions in which different forms of public opinion matter and conditions in which they do not. Let us work through examples where the forms of public opinion noted in this chapter seem most important from an analytical standpoint.

Mass opinion, as a form of public opinion, has its limitations, as noted. It is in many ways the least robust, most malleable, most tentative of all opinion forms. Mass opinion data need to be treated with great care as a result, and should not be bandied about without significant caution and qualification. On the other hand, there are cases where the issues are straightforward, where information is easily accessed by the public, and where citizens talk about the issue and therefore have considered opinions. An example with a clear majority in mass opinion was the 1998 public debate over whether Congress should pursue the

impeachment of President Clinton for allegedly perjuring himself and covering up his malfeasance. Through 1998, mass opinion in surveys and in the election results spoke clearly against pursuing impeachment. And this should have been meaningful to representatives in Congress, regardless of their own personal views or views of activated publics. In the case of potential impeachment, the public's survey responses embodied an underlying force and intelligence because the alleged misdeeds were straightforward and the public had been inundated with information about them. In addition, most Americans had engaged in discussion of the issue with family, colleagues, or neighbors, so their opinions were arrived at after some argument and consideration. This is not to say that mass opinion was immutable, but it does seem a moment where mass opinion had a legitimate call to be heeded at least to some extent by politicians. In the event, and prior to their surprisingly weak showing in the 1998 elections, the Republican majority was unmoved by mass opinion, choosing to pursue impeachment vigorously. Many different motivations no doubt propelled Republicans' choice to act against mass opinion, some of them noble, others base, and it may well have been the right decision. Regardless, here (unlike in the case of defense spending), we have both the real world conditions and the data to draw more confident inferences about the degree to which the GOP manifested democratic responsiveness to mass opinion in the United States.[3] Other cases like this would require careful scrutiny.

Activated opinion is vital in any democracy. It is our fantasy, as scholars working to improve democratic practice, that most citizens become part of active publics – writing letters, protesting, forming local political discussion groups, and so forth. But in reality, activated publics are quite small. They are unrepresentative as well, if one is interested in representing a large sector of the American public. Yet if we are to understand the policy-making process, active publics are the ones to watch, and activated public opinion is the entity to measure – active citizens are the ones most often getting represented. In our research about legislative policy staff and who represents public opinion to them (Herbst 1998a) we found that on complex matters that involve trade-offs (tax hikes for education, for example) interest groups – one form of activated public opinion – were more important to staffers than mass opinion could ever be. Most residents of Illinois governed by its legislature are either unaware of particular, complex policy issues or find it difficult to think about trade-offs, while interest groups are skilled at these sorts of analyses. Important also is that interest groups are

engaged in the political process, realizing the potential impacts of legislative action. So, for the analyst attempting to understand how public opinion plays a role in policymaking in a legislative setting, it is best to put aside mass opinion in favor of probing activated public opinion.

Latent opinion is an interesting concept in theory, but has remained since Key described it elusive for purposes of policy analysis. One possibility is to look to culture, that is, underlying values and norms, that might help us to predict with more accuracy where public opinion may end up, after the dust of a heated policy debate settles. The study of culture is complex, and while we have an overwhelmingly large array of artifacts that might "tip us off" about underlying societal norms and values (e.g., media content), political scientists have not developed sophisticated tools for the study of culture. Fortunately, we have models in other fields – particularly sociology and cultural history – that we can borrow to discern the infrastructure of American values that help form the somewhat nebulous latent opinion V. O. Key wrote about, with popular entertainment, as Delli Carpini and Williams argue in Chap. 8, a particularly promising vehicle (see Herbst 1998b for examples of analytical tools).

Perceived majorities are perhaps less elusive, at least in theory. One might survey elites (as the Pew Foundation 1998 has about other matters) or mass publics and ask them to describe what they believe to be majority sentiments on a range of issues. Responses in turn could be correlated to media use and behavioral variables. At the same time, media references to the "public mood," the way "most people feel," and the like might be toted up as another form of evidence for wide circulation of claims about "public opinion" that may or may not match other referents. If we are correct in suspecting that perceived majorities often motivate elite behavior on the one hand or legitimize it on the other, careful scholarly attention to the phenomenon would enhance understanding of the play of power in modern mediated democracies.

TOWARD THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMOCRACY

One implicit argument we have been making in this chapter is that public opinion and mass media are so often conflated and so intricately intertwined that we must consolidate the study of media and public opinion. This was the project of the Columbia School decades ago, and it is a project that must be resuscitated if we are to understand the

dynamics of politics and social life in America or any other democracy. Due to the increasing specialization of academic subfields and the great advances in survey methodology, we have allowed opinion research to become disconnected to the study of communication – an odd occurrence that might surprise Paul Lazarsfeld if he were alive today. In this essay, and in this book, we encourage vigilant and simultaneous attention to the interaction of media and public opinion. Political actors themselves understand this conflation (see Herbst 1998a), and it is time we recognize this as well.

In this chapter we described the current public opinion system, based on the framing of political information and data on public opinion by a mass media infrastructure that is crumbling around us. The traditional sources, nightly television news programs and daily newspapers, face growing competition from information genres like talk radio, online chat rooms, 24-hour satellite news channels, and customized news reports delivered by e-mail and Web site. Most of these new sources are international if not global, potentially creating a much more complex flow of information and disrupting the media's (and elites') ability to establish dominant frames. Just as important is the competition from increasingly attractive, highly targeted, and differentiated entertainment media whose growing political content may (as Delli Carpini and Williams suggest in Chap. 8) alter media effects on the public opinion system.

In studying the emerging system, predictions are hazardous. But we know the existing public opinion system has relied upon common discourse experiences that might be altered with the rise of so many differentiated channels of mediated communication (cf. Gandy in Chap. 7). Tendencies in the new system are contradictory. The centrifugal push of decentralization and differentiation of communication channels combines with the centripetal pull of allowing more individuals to communicate with each other directly, creating the *potential* for flatter power hierarchies and emergence of what Gamson in Chap. 3 calls "collective action frames" among certain groups. On the other hand, economic and cultural forces may continue to yield largely common political communication experiences for most people. Globalizing communication infrastructures and economic markets could create a steep international hierarchy in which the perspectives of a few countries will dominate the world's mediated communication experiences. Domestically, stratification could also increase: Educated elites might have extraordinarily greater opportunities to gather and share political

information among themselves, while the bottom 85 percent fiddle with their remote controls and joysticks (cf. Chap. 14, by Neuman).

Given the several referents of public opinion, and the likely influence of traditional media in shaping them, it may not be an exaggeration to suggest the very nature of public opinion as previously deployed in the political process could change significantly. Will rhetorical invocations of public opinion, based upon selective readings of polls or deliberate conflation of activated with mass opinion succeed if common public space deteriorates? How will democracy and government legitimacy be affected if assertions about public opinion become less credible?

Beyond this, will individuals' actual preferences (not aggregated into public opinion) become more informed or less? Will any decline of common public communication experiences provide individuals more control over their responses to pollsters' preframed questions – as hinted by the apparent majority who denied the relevance of President Clinton's sex life to his job performance during 1998 (Zaller's finding in Chap. 12)? Will this fragmentation of the information commons also make crystallization of latent public opinion and its conversion into an influential political force more difficult? The task facing scholars will be to make sense of the emerging public opinion system, using a more differentiated conception of public opinion and a far broader range of sources and approaches than hitherto employed.

Notes

1. Aggregating even well-reasoned and priority-ordered mass preferences in some sensible way often presents insurmountable difficulties. In Riker's (1986) words: "The popular will is defined only as long as the issue dimensions are restricted. Once issue dimensions multiply, the popular will is irresolute. Slight changes in dimensions induce disequilibrium." This is another way of saying that typical invocations of public opinion ignore trade-offs.
2. The year 1983 is an outlier, because of the March "evil empire" speech and the Autumn crisis over the Soviets' destruction of Korean Airlines Flight 007. With these four months removed, threat references average 28 per month, so the "normalized" annual total would be 336. Entering 336 negative references for 1983 brings the correlation to $r = 0.77$ ($p < 0.001$). Negative references dropped to a near-average twenty-five in December 1983, were twenty-seven in January 1984 and so forth, so the use of a normal average of twenty-eight seems right. A second measure was employed that counted *net* references to Soviet aggression, buildup, and threat. The measure reported in the text is the total assertions that Soviets were aggressive, building up, and threatening. The net measure subtracts from this the total assertions saying the Soviets were not aggressive, building up, or threatening. These counter-frame assertions remained fairly low, averaging twenty-five per year from 1977

through 1988. In 1989 they jumped to 137 and in 1990 to 254. The correlation of the net measure with the defense spending opinion is $r = 0.68$ ($p < 0.01$), compared with 0.69 for negative images only as reported in the text. The correlation using the correction for 1983 is 0.74 ($p < 0.001$), compared with the 0.77 in the text. Hence the relationship seems quite robust.

3. It is possible that GOP members did not ignore public opinion but rather that they responded to some combination of mass, activated, latent, and perceived majority opinion *within specific Congressional districts, states, and personal electoral coalitions.* If this is indeed what motivated the legislative majority, then whether such responsiveness equates to democratic representation is beyond the scope of this essay.

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