
Playing Their Part

Public opinion in American democracy

By Regina Dougherty Rodgers

Survey research provides considerable empirical support for the notion that most Americans have a paucity of knowledge when it comes to public affairs. The literature is replete with references to a public ignorant of basic political facts and incapable of forming stable and coherent opinions on the important issues of the day. This compilation of incriminating evidence calls into question the capacity of the American public to discharge its responsibility in our political process. Do we have what it takes to live up to the ideals of democracy, or is “government by the people” merely a pipe dream?

As we move through another presidential election year, this question seems particularly pertinent. By mid-March, the Republican and Democratic presidential nominees will effectively be chosen. But recent survey data show that a majority of Americans are unaware of the candidates’ positions on key issues, and those who think they know the positions are often, in fact, mistaken.

Eighty-four percent of respondents, for example, did not know Republican candidate John McCain’s position on campaign finance reform, despite it being the centerpiece of his run. Similarly, 71% had not heard of Bill Bradley’s plan to provide health care to all low-income Americans.¹ And, although George W. Bush may be the leading Republican candidate for president—not to mention governor of the state—15% of Texans recently surveyed didn’t know who he was.² So the handwringing begins anew, as scholars, journalists and pundits wonder if the American people can adequately meet the challenge of democracy.

Survey-based findings have long cast doubt on whether the public is up to the task of choosing leaders and informing policy. Examining National Election Study panel data from the late 1950s, Philip Converse concluded that the level of political knowledge in the American electorate was, at least to his mind, dangerously low. He was alarmed to find that the same people gave different answers to the same questions when interviewed at different points in time, and that minor changes in question wording led to major changes in the responses those questions elicited. Further, Converse

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discovered that most people did not hold ideologically consistent positions across a range of public policy questions. Instead, he found that their attitudes on various political matters—or their “belief systems”—did not exhibit what he termed “constraint.” In short, people’s collective policy attitudes could not be neatly plotted on the liberal-conservative continuum, but rather bounced around the ideological map.

Overall, Converse found that the American public had a remarkably unsophisticated view of political matters and was unable to conceptualize such matters in any sort of broad or abstract way. All of this led him to conclude that public opinion consisted of little more than random, “top of the head” answers people gave to pollsters, and that most people did not have “meaningful beliefs” when it came to evaluating most issues.³ His findings were taken by many as evidence that the electorate was failing to meet the standards of citizenship required by democratic theory.

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But even in the midst of the academic furor created by Converse’s findings, political scientist V.O. Key questioned such a pessimistic view of the American voter. Using different methods and data, Key defended—even extolled—the capacity of the public to form stable, responsible opinions and to contribute wisely to the process of governing. In a work left unfinished at the time of his death, Key came to a succinct yet powerful defense of the public. “The perverse and unorthodox argument of this little book,” he wrote, “is that voters are not fools.” While he acknowledged that “many individual voters act in odd ways indeed,” he argued that “in the large the electorate behaves about as rationally and responsibly as we should expect, given the clarity of the alternatives presented to it and the character of the information available to it.”⁴

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Since the writing of that “perverse” little book, many scholars have come to the defense of the American public, arguing that its opinions, rather than bouncing from position to position with no seeming order or clarity, in fact show remarkable rationality and stability. Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro make a monumental contribution to this line of thought. They argue that public opinion is essentially rational in nature, and when it changes, it tends to do so in sensible ways and for good reason.

Looking at a massive data set—the result of an analysis of thousands of questions asked in national surveys—Page and Shapiro analyze trends in American’s policy preferences between 1935 and 1990. These data, they believe, reveal that “collective responses make sense; that they draw fine distinctions among different policies; and that they form meaningful patterns consistent with a set of underlying beliefs and values.” Although Page and Shapiro acknowledge that Americans know very little about government and policy specifics, they claim that public opinion, overall, is basically stable and coherent. While individual responses to survey questions may vary from poll to poll, these changes largely disappear in the aggregate portrait. Collective opinion, they believe, is “solid and meaningful,” despite the fact that the “measured opinions of many or most individuals seem to be shaky or nonexistent.”

According to Page and Shapiro, this is true for several reasons. To begin with, collective opinion is immune to problems arising from measurement error, as these errors “cancel out across large numbers of people.” Surveys, as a result, yield far more accurate information about the collectivity than they do about any one individual. Second, they argue, temporary opinion changes by individuals tend to occur in “offsetting directions,” and, as a result, they “cancel out and allow collective measurement to reflect the more enduring tendencies of opinion.” Finally, the process of “collective deliberation” allows people to arrive at sound policy preferences “without an extensive informational base.” And, in those cases when collective public opinion does change, it does so “in predictable and understandable ways.” Rather than bouncing around from survey to survey, collective opinion responds to new information and changing conditions. It reacts in a logical and predictable fashion to major social and economic events and trends, as well as to the statements of experts and visible public officials as they are reported in the mass media.⁵

More recently, Byron Shafer and William Claggett make a strong contribution to the defense of the average American citizen, mostly because they recognize the importance of underlying political values in the forming of a stable public opinion. They argue that the average voter “does indeed possess major and continuing policy predispositions.” These predispositions “are not con-

stant responses to the details of policy promotion that may vary widely from time to time or even, when assessed, from question to question.... But they are ‘deep preferences’ to political opinion; they are comparatively confirmed and stable.”⁶ In essence, while the American public is often inattentive to and unsure of policy specifics, it holds consistent, stable views when it comes to the general direction the country is taking, and these views are based on deeply-held and well-tested values and judgements.

This is not a new idea, of course. Scholars using a wide range of survey and non-survey methodologies have shown values to be key to understanding the inner coherence of the political opinions people hold. In general, a person’s views on specific issues are usually linked in one way or another to some underlying value structure. In fact, sociologist Robert Lane made such a claim decades earlier. Based on in-depth interviews with fifteen men from an industrial city in the north-east, he argued for the importance of underlying values in the formation of opinion, firmly maintaining that the “common man” brings much to bear on the nature of the political system. Interviews of this type, of course, provide an opportunity for contextual analysis that most polls do not. And what Lane found challenges the findings of Converse just as effectively as the empirical, survey-based data of Page and Shapiro and others.

Lane observed that Americans are, in fact, ideologically constrained—not in the way that Converse would have it, but in a more fundamental way—by their faith in a common creed, grounded in the basic tenets of the American ideology, individualism and equality. These “strong ideological themes,” he believed, pervade our “mental set,” and ultimately tend to “discourage polarization.” Public opinion, so constrained, lends an invaluable stability to the political system. This, Lane asserted, is the vital contribution that the common man makes to governing in America.⁷

How is it that two such divergent perspectives on the capabilities of the public have been given credence in the public opinion literature? Can we acknowledge that the American public is uninformed in its understanding of current events and unsophisticated when it comes to its ideological groupings and still celebrate its role in the overall workings of American democracy? It depends, of course, on the role we assign it, for beyond the debate about the capacities of the public is a more fundamental question: does democratic citizenship require high levels of information or ideological constraint on matters of public policy? Clearly, some believe that a democratic polity ought to demonstrate at least a modest degree of constraint in its thinking about the important issues of the day, and few would argue that an informed and engaged electorate is not something to strive for.

But the conclusion that the American public is somehow not up to the task of governing follows from a theory of democracy that is inherently at odds with the one on which the American system is based. In *Federalist* No.10, James Madison flatly rejected the intimate and homogeneous polity essential to the Athenian conception of democracy and instead championed an extended republic based on a diversity of interests.⁸ While the former necessarily requires a highly engaged and aware populace, the latter does not. Indeed, a democracy driven by factions and located within an extended republic does not demand that the electorate be ideologically constrained or perfectly informed. On the contrary, it is through the system of representation that the self-interested views of the public are transformed, or, as Madison put it, “refined and enlarged.”⁹ If the majority of the population were constrained in the manner that Converse suggested—if their belief system was so rigid as to preclude any sort of transformation—there would be little room for the refinement of views that representation and leadership, at their best, provide.

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Those scholars who acknowledge that the role of the citizen in republican government is vitally important but in many ways limited do not despair when Americans cannot recall policy specifics or locate their views in terms of liberalism or conservatism. They recognize that the role of the public in a representative democracy is to set the boundaries in which matters of policy are debated and implemented.

Certainly no observer of public opinion was more aware of the public’s limitations, or more optimistic about its capacities, than Everett Ladd. Ladd firmly believed in the American people’s ability to participate meaningfully in the decisions that affect their lives, and his body of work amounts to a robust defense of the competence of the American citizen. He recognized that the public is often inattentive to the details of government programs and policies, and, when asked about specifics, unable to provide informed responses. But, he often pointed out, when asked about their beliefs, aspirations, hopes and values, people show impressive stability and coherence in their responses.

Indeed, the picture that emerges when reviewing the evidence compiled by Ladd over the last several decades is of a public whose interest in policy is, at best, sporadic, but whose overall opinions are solidly grounded in everyday experience and underlying values. It is a public that is unquestionably capable of sizing up the broad goals of public policy and, over time, determining the general means by which these goals are achieved.¹⁰ He frequently cited Ernest Barker’s observation that the public “cannot be regarded by itself, or in isolation, or as if it were a sovereign which was the beginning and the end, initiating everything and concluding everything.”¹¹ Like Barker, Ladd recognized that the people are “part of the system of discussion”—a discussion in which they are uniquely suited to participate. ●

Endnotes

- ¹Survey by the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy School of Government, December 8-12, 1999.
- ²Max B. Baker, “Texans Unfamiliar With Government Officials, Poll Says,” *The Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, November 27, 1999, p. 2.
- ³Philip E. Converse, “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics,” in David E. Apter (ed.), *Ideology and Discontent* (London: Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), pp. 206-261.
- ⁴V.O. Key, *The Responsible Electorate* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966), p. 7.
- ⁵Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans’ Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 384-85.
- ⁶Byron E. Shafer and William J. M. Claggett, *The Two Majorities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p. 3.
- ⁷Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology* (New York: Free Press, 1962), pp. 448-49.
- ⁸See George E. Marcus, “Democratic Theories and the Study of Public Opinion,” *Polity*, Vol. 21, 1988, pp. 25-44.
- ⁹*The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Penguin Books, 1961), p. 82.
- ¹⁰Of the many examples, see, “The 1992 Elections: Continuity and ‘Restoration’,” *The American Enterprise Magazine*, January/February 1993, pp. 44-51; “Big Swings in the National Mood are a Staple of Contemporary Politics,” *The Public Perspective*, Vol. 3, No. 2, January/February 1992, pp. 3-5; “Public Attitudes on the U.S. Military: A Case Study in Continuity,” *Government Executive*, June 1989 (with Karlyn H. Keene); “Anatomy of a Decade,” *Public Opinion*, Vol. 3, No. 1, December/January 1980, pp. 2-9 (with S.M. Lipset). For an overall view of Ladd’s thinking, see, *The American Ideology: An Exploration of the Origins, Meaning, and Role of American Political Ideas* (Storrs, CT: The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, 1994).
- ¹¹Ernest Barker, *Reflections on Government* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 41.