

# A REVIEW OF *THE RATIONAL PUBLIC*

By Fabian Echegaray

During the last thirty years, a major focus of attention in public opinion has been the debate over its properties and capabilities. To a great extent, the discussion has been dominated by arguments developed in the early 1960s by Angus Campbell and Philip Converse on the inattentiveness, instability, and randomness of mass public opinion.<sup>1</sup> Their arguments have been sufficiently provocative and empirically well-grounded to survive three decades of criticism.

Benjamin Page and Robert Shapiro's book is the most recent and best documented attempt to challenge the hegemony of Campbell's and Converse's model. Page and Shapiro find mass public opinion to be stable and coherent.

## Looking For Structure...

The authors argue that "the American public, as a collectivity, holds a number of real, stable, and sensible opinions about public policy, and that these opinions develop and change in a reasonable fashion, responding to changing circumstances and to new information" (p. 1). They rest their case on an exhaustive examination of responses to questions asked in thousands of national surveys beginning with the first Gallup and Roper polls in the 1930s. They set the public's answers on major issues in their historical context, allowing a situationally framed analysis of the patterns of responses. This contextualization proves to be an impressive and convincing choice to keep pace with the goal of continuing the dialogue over the properties of public opinion. The evidence they present has the merit not only of coping with larger issues, which broadens the empirical base of inferences about those properties, but also of setting a longitudinal frame that may help to disclose the very long-term qualities of public opinion.

Relying upon statistical aggregation of data, the authors conceptualize the notion of "collective public opinion" as con-

stituting "majority-preferred policy choices...or average positions on attitude scales, or proportion of the public choosing particular policy alternatives over others" (p.16). They describe the method as "adding together or averaging many individuals' survey responses," by which means the distorting effects of random errors of measurements tend to cancel one another out (p.15). The result: responses to "more than half—58%—of the 1,128 repeated policy questions showed no significant opinion change at all: that is, no change of 6% or more" (p.45), and when opinions changed they did so mostly in a gradual fashion, accompanying societal dynamics (generational replacement, life-cycle experiences, and different socialization influences) and outer world events (crises, social upheavals or progress, or conflicts), as well as the emergence of specific external stimuli like new information.

This is the "rational public," whose opinions are generally and longitudinally stable, and are consistent with the underlying values and beliefs from which they derive, as well as with the information supplied by trusted cue-givers like the mass media. That is, it is a public whose opinions reflect developments in the nation and the world, and change in ways that are understandable and predictable. The "rationality" of public opinion resides in its long-term patterned movements—something which seems to have been overlooked by Campbell, Converse, and their followers as they tended to stress such "negative" properties of mass public opinion as low information levels. Page and Shapiro believe they have found a "virtuoso public" ("the public, as a collectivity, has the capacity to govern," p. 383).

## ...But Forgetting The Background

By characterizing mass public opinion as "rational," however, the authors remind the reader of some classical con-

structs linked to the idea of rationality in this field, such as the level of knowledge and awareness that serve as a foundation for opinions. The attribution of rationality to public opinion because of its responsiveness and visibly patterned movements, can be arrived at only by belittling the question of how much information is behind those opinions. Page and Shapiro criticize the traditional indices of political knowledge without offering an alternative. They ask, "does it really matter whether people can name political figures, so long as they can find or recognize their names when needed and know something about the main candidates on the ballot?" (p.12). Their answer is no; which actually may be plausible given the specificity of the question, but which may also raise some doubts if generalized to other cognitive questions that may be asked. How rational would opinions be that look relatively stable over time but are not sustained by any substantial awareness of the issues?

Confronting this issue, Page and Shapiro resort to a maximization rationale: The public is "rational" not for accumulating information about what it is opinionating, but for being smart enough to find a shortcut to policy knowledge through "trustworthy cue-givers of information" (p. 391). The problem is double-edged. On one hand, we still have a public with a low level of knowledge backing most of its opinions and with a limited capability to recognize valuable information on their own, which increases the suspicion that many of its answers to survey questions are more ritualistic than rational. The fact that citizens voice opinions that may trend in a regular pattern, if taken as collective outcome, does not mean that they have a clear understanding of what they themselves stand for and of the whole range of consequences their opinions may bring.

On the other hand, Page and Shapiro's public does not emerge as an autonomous entity in its process of information gather-

ing. It is, rather, a public subjected to manipulation and highly dependent upon external information sources (from mass media, authorities, and so on). If we accept the authors' model of opinion change, those opinions are not deeply held, but simply come about as a consequence of contextual circumstances and influential actors. Ironically, by trying to redress the balance in the analysis of public opinion from Campbell's and Converse's pessimism, they leave the door open to Benjamin Ginsberg's cynicism.<sup>2</sup>

Furthermore, we have to remember that Page and Shapiro's selection of sample questions is not a random one taken from the bulk of available questions, but only of those identically and regularly repeated over the past fifty years. Because these questions tend to deal with some of the most salient and interesting issues, they create a bias. They concern events, policies, or persons that have become starkly visible, and are therefore relatively well-known. Hence, Page and Shapiro's analysis starts from a level of knowledge probably very different from that undergirding replies to questions not chosen. One accordingly doubts that a similar pattern of stability, consistency and meaningfulness would have been found in relation to the unexamined questions.

### Aggregation Makes The Difference

The other controversial point in Page and Shapiro's approach is linked to their level of statistical analysis. With the aim of challenging long-standing interpreta-

tions of public opinion as random and unstructured, the authors point to the heart of the debate by presenting their conclusions on the basis of aggregate data. Their method seeks to "collectivize" individuals' responses through aggregation devices, which make measurement errors cancel each other out and reduce the statistical randomness of individual responses. Thus, by working at the aggregate-level instead of at the individual-level, they come up with results that contradict some of the Campbell's and Converse's findings.

The problem with this strategy arises from the shifting references to individual and collective examples of data. Page and Shapiro's treatment of public opinion as a collective statistical outcome quite different from individual statistical ones may appear exaggerated: "Even if individuals' opinions or survey responses are ill-informed, shallow and fluctuating, collective opinion can be real, highly stable, and...based on all the available information" (p.17). But they do not confine their analysis to aggregate data. Instead, they shift their references from the individual to the collective as one or the other better fits their immediate argument. For example, they refer to the individual when dealing with the process of policy preference formation; they move to the collective when tackling the issue of the stability of those preferences. And every time they do that, it seems reasonable to remind the reader the susceptibility of falling into an ecological fallacy.

Page and Shapiro's method and data furnish support for the notion of the American collective public opinion as patterned, coherent, generally stable and changeable in understandable and predictable ways. They report a structured public opinion able to overcome its unattentiveness and poor levels of information, and to provide basic directions to guide policy decisions. This seems to be the outstanding virtue rescued by the authors from the traditional critiques on the public opinion's capabilities: Despite its cognitive limits, the public can react to the issues with consistent and understandable preferences, clear enough to serve as references to policy-makers. But, the issue of the public's cognitive level, and its implications for the degree of true rationality, remains unsettled. And we are left, too, with the paradox of aggregate-stability of opinions in the face of individual-level fluxes.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Angus Campbell, et al., *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1960); and Philip Converse "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics", in David Apter, ed., *Ideology and Discontent* (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964).

<sup>2</sup> We refer to Ginsberg's concept of public opinion as an outcome of elites' manipulation of people's preferences through polls. See Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Captive Public. How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

---

*Fabian Echegaray is a doctoral student, department of political science, and graduate assistant, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut*