

Democracy, Information,
and the Rational Public

Benjamin I. Page

Robert Y. Shapiro

Do not quote without permission of the author.
c 1988. Columbia Institute for Tele-Information

Columbia Institute for Tele-Information
Graduate School of Business
809 Uris Hall
Columbia University
New York, New York 10027
(212) 854-4222

Democracy involves rule by the demos, the people, or what some call the "mass public." By many accounts it also has something to do with connections between the policy preferences of citizens, on the one hand, and what their governments do, on the other. One might well expect, therefore, that a satisfactory empirical understanding of public opinion could contribute something to theoretical understandings of democracy.

For the last several years the present authors have been studying the collective policy preferences of the American public. We have assembled and analyzed an enormous amount of data from many hundreds of sample surveys conducted between 1935 and the late 1980s, and have begun to report the results in various articles (Page and Shapiro, 1988b, 1989; Shapiro and Page, 1988; Page, Shapiro and Dempsey, 1987) and a forthcoming book (Page and Shapiro, 1988a.) Here we want to outline some of our main findings and to explore what implications they may have for democratic theory.

I. Findings about Collective Public Opinion

By focusing on collective public opinion -- that is, on marginal frequencies of responses, or on percentages of the public that have said they favor or oppose various policies -- and by studying changes over time in responses to identical survey questions, we have come to some conclusions that seem quite different from those of survey research studies of individuals' opinions. Among other things, we have found that:

1. Collective policy preferences, as revealed by surveys, are quite stable. It is simply not true that collective public opinion about policy (as opposed, say, to the popularity of presidents or presidential candidates, especially early in the electoral process) fluctuates or is transient or evanescent. Most repeated survey questions about policy show no significant changes at all in the distribution of responses after the passage of weeks or months or years. We found 1128 questions that were repeated at least once. On 58% of those questions collective opinion did not change even by 6 percentage points, the amount needed to be reasonably confident that an apparent change is not just the result of sampling error (Shapiro and Page, 1988, p.216, which expands and updates the preliminary data used in Page and Shapiro, 1982.)

Moreover, when public opinion does change significantly it usually does so by rather small amounts: usually by only 6 or 8 or 10 percentage points, amounts that are distinguishable from random sampling error but not of enormous substantive significance. Of the 556 instances of significant change in our data, nearly half (44 %) amounted to less than 10 percentage points. Changes as big as 20 or 30 percentage points were quite exceptional, constituting only 13% of the cases and usually involving many years of gradual change (Shapiro and Page, 1988, p.217.)

Only very seldom does public opinion fluctuate -- that is, change significantly in opposite directions within a short time. Examining 173 survey questions that were asked often enough to detect fluctuations (which we defined as consisting of two or more significant changes in opposite directions within two years, or three or more changes within four years), we found that only 31 questions, or 18% of them, revealed fluctuations in opinion (Shapiro and Page, 1988, p.219.)

To put the same findings in another way, the level of public opinion about a policy at time 1 is a very strong predictor of opinion on the same question at time 2. In our TV impact study, in

which we examined 80 policy questions that were repeated after short intervals of few weeks or months, the level of opinion at time 1, by itself, accounted for 85% of the cross-sectional variance in levels of opinion at time 2. In a full regression that controlled for all the news content variables, previous opinion had a nearly perfect unstandardized coefficient, 0.97, in predicting the current level of opinion (Page, Shapiro and Dempsey, 1987, p.28,30.)

2. Collective public opinion is real. Despite the familiar findings that most citizens know and care rather little about politics, and despite arguments that unstable "non-attitudes" prevail at the individual level, public opinion at the collective level is substantial and meaningful.

The stability in aggregate responses to surveys does not merely result from people flipping mental coins and producing the same random distribution of responses each time. Response distributions do not always take the neat forms (50% "for", 50% "against," for example; or 33% pro, 33% con, 33% in the middle) that random equiprobable responses would generate. Distributions vary widely. Sometimes opinions are evenly balanced; sometimes there are lopsided majorities on one side or another. Moreover, collective responses to different questions differ in ways that fall into coherent patterns and reflect underlying values. Often the public's reaction to a particular policy may be predicted from its reaction to related policies.

This is not easily demonstrated quantitatively, but it is evident to anyone who takes a close look at Americans' collective policy preferences. Only for this reason is it possible for journalists and scholars to write their many articles and books concerning "what the public thinks" about one issue area or another. Typically the preferences of majorities on various issues are consistent with a belief system that could be held by a single, reasonably well informed and intelligent individual. Often one can discern a set of predominant values underlying collective opinion. (See Feldman, 1988; McClosky and Zaller, 1984.)

3. Collective policy preferences change in predictable ways. When aggregate public opinion does change, it does not do so capriciously or whimsically or without reason. Nearly all the significant changes we have observed can be accounted for in certain clearly specifiable ways: in terms of gradual changes in the society or the population (technological, economic, or social changes, and the replacement of age cohorts); or major events (especially wars, international crises, and economic changes); or new information (especially TV news reports of the statements and actions of experts, media commentators, and popular presidents.)

When we analyzed all 556 significant opinion changes in historical context, very few proved to be mysterious. Nearly all followed naturally from major events or historical developments (Page and Shapiro, 1988a, Ch. 3-6.) Moreover, in our TV impact study, using policy questions that were repeated within a few weeks or months, we found that we could account for the bulk of opinion change by means of variables drawn from our content analysis of TV news shows broadcast between repeated surveys. That is to say --contrary to much of the old wisdom about "minimal effects"-- short term changes in collective policy preferences largely depend on what appears in the mass media (Page, Shapiro and Dempsey, 1987.) Our earlier study of the impact of front page New York Times stories yielded similar results (Page and Shapiro, 1984.)

4. Public opinion responds in sensible ways to events and to new information as conveyed by the media. This point is somewhat harder to establish, more subject to controversy and disagreement. Yet we are convinced, on the basis of our historical analyses and our media impact studies, that the public as a collectivity generally reacts sensibly -- or, as we loosely put it, "rationally" -- to events, as those events are reported (or directly experienced), and as they are interpreted by

American leaders and experts and editorialists through the media.

That is to say, in most cases changes in aggregate public opinion make sense in terms of altered calculations of the costs and benefits of alternative public policies, as such calculations would be made by a rational citizen with typical American values and beliefs when exposed to information from the U.S. media. In many cases this is obvious to anyone looking at the survey data in historical context. When another country is reported to attack U.S. forces or U.S. allies, there tends to be an increase in support for a military response. When a war goes badly there is less insistence on harsh peace terms. When more women work outside the home and when Thalidomide and rubella are reported to cause widespread birth defects, more people see unplanned pregnancies or deformed fetuses as problems and accept the idea of legalizing abortions. When there is a recession, fewer Americans favor spending money on discretionary items like the space program. When experts testify that a proposed treaty would hurt American interests, more people oppose it. It is difficult to quantify or count such patterns, but when one examines the data they are unmistakable.

We cannot -- and for most purposes need not -- take a position on precisely how and why this collective rationality comes to be. Our aggregate data do not allow us to determine to what extent individual citizens make their own cost/benefit calculations, based on detailed information, or (for example) to what extent they simply take cues from opinion leaders -- experts, editorialists, like-minded interest groups. What we know is the result. An account of collective opinion change can largely take the form of explaining how perceived costs and benefits changed, and how policy preferences changed as a consequence.

5. There exists a complex system of producing, distributing, and processing political information for the public. To understand the actual or potential role of public opinion in a democracy it is necessary to consider what sort of information, of what quality, is conveyed to the public, in what ways. When we bring together our data on public opinion and our examination of the contents of the mass media that affect it, and when we ask where those media contents come from, we begin to see the outlines of a very complicated information system.

We have found, for example, that media-reported statements by commentators and by nominally nonpartisan "experts" are associated with very large changes in collective public opinion (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Page and Shapiro, 1984.) If newspaper editorials and "arms control experts" say SALT II (the proposed second strategic arms limitation treaty with the Soviet Union) would contribute to Soviet missile superiority, the public tends to turn against the treaty. If "social insurance experts" say the Social Security system needs changes to avoid bankruptcy, the public tends to go along.

But who are these experts? Who funds them, trains them, produces them? Who decides which ones are worth listening to, and why? Do editorial commentaries reflect the views of newspeople, or of audiences they want to please, or of media managers and owners? Is the result a smoothly functioning marketplace of ideas that generally gets at the truth? On these matters it is easier to raise questions than to offer definite answers, but the questions themselves -- and evidence relevant to them -- may point toward important implications for democratic theory.

6. The information available to the public is not always accurate or unbiased. Here our work to date can offer only tentative suggestions, but suggestions that are consistent with the results of a number of communications studies. To put it bluntly: those who speak to the public do not always speak the truth, let alone the whole truth. Deception and misleading information abound.

This is most obvious in the case of foreign affairs, where U.S. officials, like officials

everywhere, often try to control information or deliberately distort it, aided by a U.S. information system dependent upon official sources and receptive to patriotic interpretations. The contrasting treatment in the American media of the U.S. and Soviet shootdowns of Iranian and Korean civilian airliners is only a particularly recent and particularly striking example; from the misreported naval incidents preceding World War II, to the exaggerated Cold War rhetoric of the late 1940s and early 1950s, the concealed covert operations of the 1950s and 1960s, the deceptions of the Tonkin Gulf and the Vietnam war, and the Russian scares of the 1970s, recent American history offers many cases in which international realities have been distorted, with the predominant media messages favoring administration policies and nationalistic perspectives (Page and Shapiro, 1989.)

Outside the realm of foreign policy there tends to be less monolithic control of information, and (perhaps for that reason) fewer blatant examples of outright deception (but see Tulis, 1987; and consider the relative treatment of unemployment and inflation noted in Hibbs, 19___, or of labor and capital reported in Parenti, 1986, ch. 5.)

In cases without clear post facto contrasts between agreed facts and reported statements, or clear evidence of intentional misrepresentation, it is hard to avoid getting bogged down in swamps of controversy and subjectivity concerning what is true or false, what is misleading, what "unbiased" news should look like, and what biases, if any, exist. We have tentatively suggested, however, that certain systematic biases -- or, perhaps better, certain value perspectives -- tend to pervade the news. These include slants that are generally nationalistic, anticommunist, procapitalist (though critical of corporate malefactors), pro-incumbent (though, again, critical of individual peccadilloes), favorable to the policies of the party in power, and favorable to the status quo (Page and Shapiro, 1989.) Since there is room for considerable disagreement about such matters, however, and since much work remains to be done before we can be confident of the answers, we see the crucial point at present to be simply that there are grounds for fearing certain kinds of systematic bias in the information system.

II. Theories of Representative Democracy

Findings about the nature and dynamics of Americans' policy preferences are most plainly relevant to those varieties of democratic theory that apply to large, diverse societies and focus on relationships between citizens' preferences and government policies. That is to say, the implications are most clear with respect to issues of responsiveness and control in representative democratic systems which are primarily "adversary" rather than "unitary" (Mansbridge, 1980.) At the same time, however, our work on the mass media and the broader information system also suggests some ideas about political education and collective deliberation that bear upon the more participatory strands of democratic theory emphasizing human development and the transformation of character.

One simple and straightforward variant of democratic theory holds that governments exist in order to pursue the interests of their citizens; that the citizens themselves are the best judges of those interests and the most reliable guarantors that they will be pursued; and that, therefore, when a numerous community must delegate day-to-day governmental power to representatives, the citizens of the community as a whole should choose those representatives and determine what they do.

It is not easy, in American or English political thought (or to our knowledge, anywhere else) to find pure statements of such a democratic theory, especially before rather recent times. The Founders of the United States government, for example, were wary of the general public and devised institutions to limit the power of popular majorities. But they did accept much of the logic

of the democratic argument in terms of the "republican principle" or the "republican form," which they saw as necessary along with stability and energy in government and an "inviolable attention due to liberty" (e.g. Federalist #35, in Hamilton, Madison, and Jay, 1961, p.226.) Thus Madison, in Federalist #57, declared that the aim of every political constitution is to obtain for rulers men who possess wisdom and virtue to pursue the common good, and to "take the most effectual precautions for keeping them virtuous..." The elective mode is used for obtaining leaders, and the most effectual means for preventing their degeneracy is limitation of the term of appointment to maintain a "proper responsibility to the people" (Hamilton et al., 1961, pp. 350-351.)

In his 1820 "Essay on Government," James Mill set forth at some length a control-oriented democratic theory of representative government, building it upon utilitarian foundations. He maintained that the business of government is to "increase to the utmost the pleasures, and diminish to the utmost the pains, which men derive from one another" (1978, p.56), and to insure to every man the greatest possible quantity of the produce of his labor (p.57.) A large community in mass is ill-adapted for the business of government (p.59), but if powers are put into the hands of one or a few they will take from the rest of the community -- without limit -- wealth and the objects of desire, and use terror to impose their will, defeating the very end of government (pp.61-69.) A representative system provides the solution: the community itself, or a portion of community with interests identical to those of the whole community¹, must choose the representatives and check their actions periodically. "(L)essening duration" in office is the instrument for diminishing the representative's power and identifying, as nearly as possible, the interests of those who rule, with the interests of those who are ruled (pp. 72-77.)

Similar ideas -- usually less clearly spelled out, but built on the same foundations and advocating increasingly broad conceptions of what portion of the citizenry should be allowed to choose representatives, and how closely those representatives should adhere to the public's wishes -- were expressed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by successful democratic politician/theorists like Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, and Woodrow Wilson.

James Mill was rather vague about how citizens would exert their control and exactly what the effects would be -- for example, whether or not government action would be expected to correspond precisely to the public's policy preferences. His discussion of periodic elections (pp. 75-77) barely hinted at electoral competition by vote-seeking politicians as a mechanism of democratic control.² Only much later did democratic theorists and Mill's utilitarian heirs, modern economists, begin to spell out exactly how the behavior of citizens and their representatives might interact to produce democratic outcomes.

¹ In what today seems a departure from his principles, Mill rather casually remarked that women need not be included in the choosing body because most or all of their interest is "involved" in that of their husbands or fathers (p.79) For equally questionable and less clearly articulated reasons, Mill did not rule out property qualifications (pp. 80-82) or the continued power of the monarch and the aristocratic House of Lords (pp.87-88.)

² Mill argued that limited terms of office need not mean representatives should be frequently changed; there is good reason for always reelecting one who has done his duty, because the longer he serves the more he knows (p.77.) But he did not discuss office holders' incentives. Limited terms were merely supposed to make more difficult the amassing of sufficient profits from misgovernment to outweigh later losses as a citizen (p.75.) (This would not seem to prevent, and might under Mill's assumptions even encourage, quick plunder of the treasury by transient office holders.) Similarly, Mill had little to say about how voting decisions would likely be made or what sort of representation would result.

The prevailing theory of representative democracy in the nineteenth century was probably a weakly articulated version of "responsible party" theory, based on the idea that politicians would form parties and present clear issue-based choices; voters would perceive those choices and select the party closest to their own positions; and the winning party would carry out the popular will-- or at least stray less far from doing so than the losing party would have done.³ Possible troubles with this idea are at least four: first, in practice parties may not present clear choices (and may in fact have incentives to the contrary); second, if the parties do present clear choices, voters may not perceive and act upon them; third, even if voters do perceive the differences and elect the preferred party, the party may not keep its promises; and fourth -- most important -- even if a responsible party system works exactly as advertised, it guarantees nothing more than that the lesser evil (that is, the policies of the less unpopular party) will be enacted. There is no guarantee that elites -- especially party-connected elites -- will not rule. This is true even of the more interesting variants of the theory in which parties are supposed to inspire and educate their followers: who decides in what direction to inspire and educate them? (See Ranney, 1962; Page, 1978, ch. 2.)

There gradually developed an alternative theory (though never a fully worked out theory) of democratic control, less idealistic about political leaders and less demanding of citizens: one involving anticipation of electoral reward and punishment. If self-interested politicians merely want to stay in office, and voters do no more than throw the rascals out when times are bad or re-elect them when times are good, then officials will always have an incentive to anticipate the public's reactions, carrying out policies calculated to make the citizenry happy by election day. Such a process might, at least in a rough fashion, bring about a correspondence between policy and citizens' informed preferences: preferences informed, that is, by post-policy experience up to election day, with leaders given pre-election leeway to figure out which policies will produce good results. (See Friedrich, 1939, pp. 17-18, on "anticipated reactions"; Key, 1961, pp. 263-287, 472-480; Page, 1978, ch. 7; Fiorina, 1981.)

The market analogy and economics-style assumptions about individuals acting in their own self interest clearly play a part in the electoral reward and punishment model. They came to have important impacts on democratic theory in other ways as well. Harold Hotelling, for example, in 1929 pioneered what we now call "spatial models": he analyzed two-party competition in terms of vote-seeking parties' choices of positions on an ideological (liberal/conservative) continuum, with issue-oriented voters forcing them to take the median -- that is, the most popular available-- position in order to win (Hotelling, 1929.) Thus the hidden hand of political competition, like the hidden hand of economic competition, may lead to optimal outcomes. Government may exactly follow the policy preferences of the citizenry.

Subsequently Downs (1957) popularized and elaborated upon the logic of spatial competition (ch. 7), and also discussed more general (non-spatial) political competition; Davis and Hinich (1966) formalized the model for multiple issue dimensions; and a whole academic industry got under way. The theoretical results are complex, but they boil down to this: if a unique equilibrium outcome of electoral competition exists -- which cannot be guaranteed -- then the most popular possible

³ Here and elsewhere we assume that often (if not always) there exists a "democratic will" or a "majority preference" that could be carried out. Arrow (1963, orig. publ. 1951) and others have of course shown that the existence of such a collectively preferred outcome cannot be guaranteed. The fact that many democratic assemblies, public and private, have produced years of fairly stable policies, however, suggests that cyclical majorities and lack of majority rule equilibrium may be of greater theoretical than empirical importance.

package of policies (that is, those policies corresponding to the grand median of voters' positions in a multidimensional issue space, or near the center of voters' preferences) will exert a strong influence on the position of a winning party or candidate and therefore -- inferentially -- upon government policy (Davis, Hinich, and Ordeshook, 1970, pp.441-442; Enelow and Hinich, 1984, pp.221-222; Ordeshook, 1986, ch. 4, esp. pp. 200-201.)

Meanwhile, social choice economists, following up on Arrow (1963), explored the normative foundations of populistic democracy. They took seriously citizens' policy preferences as the foundation for governments' actions, and inquired into the properties of various methods of aggregating those preferences into collective choices.

Especially important is the work of Kenneth May (1952), which provided precise theoretical support for the widely held belief that simple majority rule is superior to any other democratic or quasi-democratic procedure. May proved that, among procedures that aggregate individuals' preferences into collective decisions (using only ordinal, pairwise information), majority rule is exactly and uniquely defined by four generally desirable properties: 1) it is always decisive between pairs of alternatives (that is, it always produces a collective winner or a tie, for any set of individual preferences); 2) it ensures political equality or "anonymity," with no particular individual's preferences counting differently from any other's; 3) it ensures neutrality among alternatives, so that no particular alternative (e.g. the status quo) is favored over any other⁴; and 4) it guarantees positive responsiveness: if the collectivity chooses alternative A over B or the two are tied, and if one individual then changes his or her preferences in a way favorable to alternative A, then the collectivity will choose alternative A.)⁵

May's analysis showed not only that majority rule has these properties, but that only majority rule has all four properties. In effect, majority rule becomes the ordinal version of the Benthamite "felicific calculus," or greatest happiness principle, defining and realizing as closely as possible the elusive concept of "what the people want." It has two conspicuous advantages over the old utilitarian formulation: it provides a real-world political procedure, rather than mandating a speculative or infeasible summing of individuals' cardinal utilities; and it takes account of intensities of preference in a more appropriate manner.⁶

⁴ May (fn. 6) offered the opinion that there are many situations in which neutrality is not desirable, but he offered no examples. Neutrality, together with positive responsiveness, distinguishes simple majority rule from special majority requirements (i.e., requirements for substantially more than 50% support to pass a bill) that privilege the status quo.

⁵ To be sure, neither majority rule nor any other such decision procedure can be guaranteed to produce a decisive choice or a transitive ordering among multiple alternatives (Arrow, 1963), but, as we have indicated, it is not obvious that this has serious empirical consequences. Institutions built upon majority rule often manage to make decisions. The stability of those decisions from day to day and year to year suggests that they represent something more than agenda manipulation through arbitrary sequencing and cutting off of pairwise comparisons. (Granted, stability in complex polities like the U.S. national government undoubtedly is increased by the existence of multiple veto points and the special position of the status quo as the default option.) The possible chaos of cycling majorities suggested by social choice theory (e.g. McKelvey, 1976) does not seem to occur often in real world politics.

⁶ A telling criticism of utilitarianism is that by trying to make interpersonal comparisons of cardinal utilities it theoretically favors hypersensitive gluttons (those who claim more of the world's goods because they are capable of feeling such exquisite pleasures) and creates incentives for

Further, as Rae (1969) conjectured and Straffin (1977) proved (using a Rawls-like original position argument), majority rule is the best decision procedure from the point of view of an individual, selfish or altruistic, who wants to maximize the chances that government policies will correspond with his or her own preferences, not knowing in advance what the alternatives or others' preferences will be. Considering a series of future decisions between pairs of alternatives, the expected frequency of agreement between the collective decision and an individual's preferences is greater under majority rule than any other voting procedure, including those that require special majorities or weight some individuals more heavily than others.⁷

Clearly, then, majority rule has much to recommend it. Our discussion so far suggests that representatives should do precisely what majorities of the the public want, and that there exist some plausible ways in which this might come about. But this line of reasoning holds only if we accept citizens' preferences as the bedrock upon which collective decisions should be built. Many objections to majoritarian democracy have argued that citizens' preferences are defective in some respect: that they are dangerous to other's rights, for example, or that they do not accurately reflect citizens' true values and interests; that they are ill-informed, capricious, or even

people to lie or to throw bricks through windows in order to demonstrate their intensity. Majority rule, by insisting upon political equality, rules out such piggish behavior. But it is a mistake to think that majority rule altogether ignores the intensity of preferences. If an individual feels intensely about abortion, for example, in the sense of ranking virtually all states of the world that include pro-choice policies above virtually all that don't, while not caring much about defense policy, majority rule tends to reflect that kind of intrapersonal intensity in collective choices. (That is, such an individual will tend to have more impact on abortion policy than on defense policy, when preferences among whole packages of policies -- or alternative social states -- are aggregated into a collective choice through majority rule.) In this way certain kinds of interpersonal intensity differences are taken into account as well: for example, the fact that individual A distinguishes sharply on abortion grounds in ranking alternative policy packages but individual B does not, will tend to give A a larger voice on abortion policy and B a larger voice on something else, while preserving their over-all political equality.

The "intensity problem" in majority rule has been the subject of much confusion (see Dahl, 1956, pp. 48-50.) It has been invoked to legitimate the notion that government should respond to political activity, organization, and money, not just to the preferences of equally weighted citizens, on the grounds that activity and resources are proxies for intensity. We view this as factually very questionable (since resources are unequally distributed and differentially available for use regardless of intensity), conducive to false shows of intense feeling, and fundamentally undemocratic. Much confusion about majority rule and intensity probably arises from thinking about one issue at a time rather than choices among whole packages of policies, which can be made piecewise through logrolling. Some confusion also results from the multiplicity of possible definitions of intensity (intrapersonal and interpersonal, cardinal and ordinal, in several variants)-- some worthy of political notice and some probably not -- which can hardly be discussed without reference to formal models, and from the lack of accessible theoretical results about them. (See Sen, 1970, esp. ch. 7,8,10; Schwartz, 1986, esp. pp. 28-32.)

⁷ To be sure, if we know in advance that preferences are so patterned (e.g. along ethnic or religious or class lines) that certain minorities will regularly lose, this presents problems for minority obedience to laws and adherence to the system; and, if we are willing to make cardinal interpersonal comparisons to the extent of judging that their utility losses exceed the majority's gains, it casts doubt upon the justice of majority rule outcomes. Possible solutions include separatism or, if the status quo is preferred, some form of supermajoritarian or "consociational" protection of the minority. (See Dahl, 1956, ch. 4; Barry 1979.)

nonexistent. It is here that our empirical work bears most directly upon democratic theory.

III. Is the Public Ignorant and Incapable?

Many influential critiques of populistic democracy, and many arguments for restraining or ignoring the views of the general public, have to do with alleged incapacities of ordinary citizens. The strongest indictments concern lack of political information and lack of motivation or cognitive skills to receive and process information. These are said to cause citizens to have policy preferences that do not correspond to their true values and interests or to the public good, and perhaps to have no real preferences at all.

We will deal with these issues in terms of a series of questions, the answers to several of which should already be apparent from section I. After discussing the capacity of the public we will turn, in the following section, to issues concerning what sorts of information and experience are provided (or not provided) to the public by what we can call the "information system."

1. Are citizens' policy preferences meaningless, nonexistent, or unknowable? An extreme version of the "non-attitudes" argument -- though not, of course, one propounded by Converse himself (1964, 1970) -- maintains that ordinary citizens' policy preferences are unreal, meaningless, or at least unknowable through survey research, which is said to elicit nothing more than random responses or "doorstep opinions." If this is so, then to seek a correspondence between government policies and citizens' preferences is to seek a will-o'-the-wisp. Policy cannot respond to what does not exist. A milder version of this argument holds that public opinion offers "no guidance" on specific policy questions. What provides no guidance can comfortably be ignored.

Our answer to this question is a definite "no." Whatever the truth may be about "nonattitudes" at the individual level (see Achen, 1975), and despite the well documented paucity of specific political information (especially concerning proper names and acronyms) among most individual Americans, collective policy preferences are distinctly real and readily knowable through survey research. This conclusion, as we have noted, is based on several years of working through the data from thousands of survey questions, which show collective responses that are quite stable, that make fine distinctions among different policies, and that form meaningful patterns consistent with a coherent set of underlying beliefs and values (see Page and Shapiro, 1988b, Ch. 2-6; Shapiro and Page, 1988.)

The apparent paradox that collective opinion is solid and meaningful, while the measured opinions of many or most individuals seem to be shaky or nonexistent, can probably be explained by a combination of two factors: 1) random measurement errors cancel out across many respondents, so that surveys yield much more accurate information about the collectivity than about any particular individual; and 2) temporary opinion changes by different individuals occur in offsetting directions, so that they too cancel out and allow collective measurements to reflect the more enduring tendencies of opinion (Page and Shapiro, 1988a, Ch. 1.) For present purposes, however, the important point is not the cause but the consequence: democracy is not impossible due to nonexistent public opinion.⁸ An attentive reader of polls and surveys and other reliable indicators

⁸ Since our data come from available surveys that often ask only for "favor" or "oppose" responses to a stated policy, rather than for preference rankings among several policies (let alone rankings of alternative social states), we can tell little or nothing about whether or not there have generally existed Condorcet winners (packages of policies that could defeat all other packages by majority vote in pairwise comparisons) or whether there have been cyclical majorities that might

of public opinion can get plenty of guidance about policy.

2. Is public opinion capricious, whimsical, or evanescent? Some of the reasons that Hamilton, Madison, and Jay (1961) gave for restraining the popular will -- shackling it with a powerful, indirectly elected President, an independent Senate protected by long terms in office, and the like -- had to do with alleged "temporary errors and delusions," or "fluctuations," or "transient impulse(s)" or "violent passions" in opinion (see Page and Shapiro, 1988b.) Similarly, Almond's (1960) "mood theory" suggested that the public's opinions on foreign policy move erratically, responding impulsively to crises and then snapping back their old state of apathy and ignorance.

Again, we can give a definite "no" answer. Collective public opinion about policy is remarkably stable. It rarely fluctuates (Shapiro and Page, 1988; see also Caspary, 1970.) When opinion changes, it does so in predictable and sensible ways. Even abrupt changes in foreign policy opinions nearly always represent reasonable responses to sudden events, and do not tend to "snap back." What may possibly have been true in the Founders' times is certainly not true now.⁹

Again, the reason may have to do with the offsetting effects of random opinion movements by individuals, so that collective public opinion remains stable. Once more, however, the consequence is more important, for present purposes, than the cause. There is little reason to fear or scorn public opinion as capricious.¹⁰

3. Are ordinary citizens inherently too ignorant to know their own interests or the public good? This question is at the heart of many objections to majoritarian democracy. The authors of the Federalist papers, for example, worried not merely that public opinion vacillated, but that it erred. John Stuart Mill drastically modified the reasoning of his father James, not only advocating, late in the day (1861), a severely limited suffrage, but favoring public rather than secret ballots, extra votes for the prosperous and the educated, "merit" appointment rather than election of most officials, no pledges by representatives to their constituents, and very limited functions for the elected body. All this on the grounds that common people (especially the working class) were not competent to rule and were likely to demand class legislation (Mill, 1958.)

make democracy impossible in a different sense. This is worth investigation through surveys designed for the purpose.

⁹ As more than one colleague has pointed out, this may reflect the success of the Founders' experiment: the great increase in prosperity, the spread of public education, the development of mass media, and other changes during the past two hundred years of American history. Lacking data on public opinion from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, we cannot tell whether or not it was fundamentally different then.

¹⁰ This does not, of course, dispose of the Founders' concern that majority opinion might be dangerous to rights, especially property rights; that ordinary citizens might come up with "improper or wicked" projects like the printing of paper money (Madison, Federalist #10, in Hamilton et al., 1961, p.84.) De Tocqueville's (1954; orig. pub. 1835, 1840) fear of "tyranny of the majority" amounted to much the same thing. The passage of time has eroded the natural rights basis for such arguments, however. With respect to the protections still in high repute among libertarians (freedom of speech, assembly, the press, religious observance, and the like), the aggregate survey data leave it far from clear that the general public has been markedly less supportive than decision making elites were in, say, the Truman loyalty/security and the McCarthy investigation period. (See also Gibson, 1988.)

In more recent times, Walter Lippmann (1922; even more so, 1925) issued scathing denunciations of the public's capabilities, maintaining that reality differs sharply from the "stereotypes" or "pictures" in people's heads. Schumpeter (1975, orig. pub. 1942) declared that individuals' opinions are not "definite" or "independent" or "rational," and that on most political matters individual volition, command of fact, and method of inference are defective (ch. 21, esp. p. 261.)

Survey research by Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954), Campbell, Converse, Miller, and Stokes (1960), and others, soon seemed to bear this out. Surveys revealed that most Americans knew little about politics, cared little, and apparently made their voting decisions on the basis of demographic characteristics or habitual party loyalties, which scholars (perhaps too quickly) took to indicate lack of rational deliberation. Converse's (1964) demonstration of weak ideological structure and unstable individual attitudes seemed for a while to close the case.

The result for contemporary democratic theory is well known. Schumpeter's attenuated procedural definition of democracy, in which elite leadership competes for voters' acquiescence but does not necessarily respond to their policy preferences (1975, ch. 22), carried the day with more than a decade of scholarship. Dahl (1956, ch. 2) criticized "populistic" democracy. Berelson (1952) noted that citizens' passivity might be just as well as a "buffer" for system stability. Most of the leaders of the political science and sociology professions rejected majoritarian democracy; they embraced some form of pluralistic or "polyarchival" system in which organized interest groups play an important part, and in which participation by, or responsiveness to, the general public is limited.

We agree with the critiques by Walker (1966) and others (see Kariel, 1970, Part 2; Pateman, 1970; Barber, 1984) that this revisionism blamed the victim, ignoring system-level influences upon citizens' behavior (apathy about elections, for example, may result from legal restrictions or repression or lack of attractive candidates and parties); that it abandoned a worthy normative ideal and turned democratic theory into little more than a conservative ratifier of the status quo; and that it ignored the classical arguments that participation promotes political education and human development.

In particular, we believe that the revisionists overinterpreted survey research results and gave up too quickly on the public. This should have been clear even before research contrasting the 1960s with the 1950s (e.g. Nie, Verba, and Petrocik, 1979) cast a more favorable light on citizens' capacities by showing that they displayed more interest and knowledge and ideology in a more lively political environment. The original findings that most Americans did not live up to some "classical democratic theory" of dubious provenance -- an alleged theory calling for an unrealistically high level of political knowledge and sophistication -- never really had much to do with the desirability of majoritarian democracy.

For one thing, there is no reason to think that abundant information is needed for voting choices; cues from like-minded citizens and groups (even cues related to demographic characteristics and party labels) may be sufficient, in an environment where accurate information is available, to permit voters to act as if they had all the available information (McKelvey and Ordeshook, 1986; see also Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986.¹¹ Much the same reasoning applies to the formation of policy preferences. Using their underlying beliefs and values, together with cues from leaders and like-minded citizens they trust, people can come up with reasonable opinions (that is, opinions

¹¹ This is true of responsible party or electoral competition processes in which citizens vote according to how close parties' or candidates' stands are to their own policy preferences. It is all the more true of electoral reward and punishment, in which voters need only compare current with past conditions.

consonant with their basic beliefs and values) about a wide variety of issues -- even fairly technical issues. They need not be sure about the differences between Nicaragua and El Salvador, for example, in order to figure out whether they favor aiding the "contras" efforts to overthrow a socialist regime in the Americas.

Moreover, our empirical work indicates that collective public opinion shows a considerably higher level of information and sophistication than is apparent at the individual level, and that it has done so over at least five decades. In part this results from the same aggregating processes we have previously alluded to, which average out individual measurement errors and random opinion changes. In part it reflects the logic of information pooling: by an extension of the Condorcet jury theorem, if each individual has a reasonably good (but very imperfect) chance of judging whether a particular assertion is true -- or whether a particular policy will satisfy his or her interests or the common good -- then, by simple operation of the laws of probability, a majority of independently judging individuals has a much higher probability of being right (Miller, 1986; Grofman and Feld, 1988.) And, in part, collective wisdom may result from the sort of deliberative processes discussed below. Either way, collective opinion represents much more than any one of its individual parts: either an aggregation of many individual opinions, or an interactive combination of them.

In any case, our work has led us to a sufficient appreciation of collective public opinion that we do not hesitate to apply the term "rational" to it. Without claiming that we have any special knowledge of what people's true interests are -- much less what the common good is -- we are convinced by the general stability, differentiation, and coherent patterning of collective policy preferences that characterizations of public opinion as ignorant fall very wide of the mark. Were we to think otherwise, of course, there would still remain the awkward question: who, then, is better able than the public itself to judge its interests?

4. Does the public fail to comprehend changing realities? Certain critiques of democracies as "ungovernable" (Crozier, Huntington and Watanuki, 1975) have suggested that the public simply cannot keep up with the complexity of an ever-changing world. Much the same theme animated Lippmann's last (1956) major fulmination against the public, in which he argued that the liberal democracies were paralyzed with regard to the great questions of war and peace, because of the "derangement" of pressure from public opinion -- which not only compulsively made mistakes, and was easily deceived, but was too slow to react (e.g. p.24.)

Our data provide little or no evidence that the American public has failed in this respect, during the 1950s or the 1970s or any other time. Collective opinion has responded rapidly and in sensible ways (given the information that was provided), to international events, wars, and crises, as well as to more subtle gradual trends.

On the whole, then, we see the public -- at least the twentieth century U.S. public -- as considerably more capable and competent than criticisms or revisions of democratic theory would have us believe.

Whether or not that capacity is fully realized, however -- and, therefore, whether or not majoritarian democracy can actually work well -- depends also upon the political environment in which citizens find themselves: especially upon what opportunities for political learning and what quality of political information are provided to them by what we can call the "information system." If a society provides accurate, helpful information about public policy; if it offers moral leadership, encourages participation, and in a broad sense educates its citizenry, then there is every reason to expect that citizens will rise to the occasion and democracy will flourish. If, on the other hand, the system minimizes public participation and obscures policy making processes so that unpopular

government actions go undetected, democratic control cannot be expected to function, no matter how competent the public is. And if politicians and others deceive or mislead the public, if they manipulate citizens' policy preferences so as to betray their own interests and values, democracy is a sham. Responsiveness to manipulated preferences would be nothing to celebrate. A further set of questions, therefore, concerns the information system.

IV. Does the Information System Promote Democracy?

Our findings in this area are more tentative and largely focus on the nature and quality of political information conveyed through the mass media. But they are sufficient at least to suggest that there is more reason to worry about the quality of the information system (that is, about institutions and structures and activities at the elite level) than about the capacity of ordinary citizens.

1. Does collective deliberation occur? #63 of the Federalist papers, apparently by Madison (Hamilton, et al., 1961, p.384), argues persuasively that the "cool and deliberate sense of the community" -- as opposed to any temporary errors or delusions -- ought ultimately to prevail in government. Deliberation plays a central part in the Founders' scheme of government (Bessette, 1980.) While the concept is sometimes taken as antithetical to majoritarian democracy, it can be encompassed within it in terms of time that is provided for public reflection, debate, and discussion (see Dahl, 1956, pp. 56-59), and a system of research and expertise, the fruits of which are diffused to the general public.

Does there exist in the United States a system of deliberation sufficient to ensure that the policy preferences measured by surveys embody the "cool and deliberate sense of the community?" We think the answer, generally speaking, is yes. There certainly exists an elaborate system of policy-relevant research, which is publicized through testimony and books and articles and is debated by commentators and political leaders. The thrust of such debates tends eventually to reach the public, through the very extensive and pervasive mass communications media. We have found that editorial commentary and media reports of experts' statements are very strong predictors of collective opinion change -- in fact stronger than any other messages carried by the media (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987.) No doubt the process of collective deliberation also involves some conversations between ordinary citizens and their friends, family members, and coworkers.

Thus by the time a national poll is taken -- and certainly by the time a survey question has been asked more than once -- we can be fairly sure that expressed public opinion has, in the Founders' words, been "refine(d) and enlarge(d)" (Federalist #10, p.82), not by being passed through a "chosen body," but by being subjected to public debate. We do not by any means wish to imply that the system could not be improved upon, a project worth serious thought and effort. But it already works well enough to produce the kind of generally well informed public opinion, responsive to changing realities and new information, that we have described.

2. Does the U.S. provide adequate political education? This may be another matter. Education, in one form or another -- the acquisition of information, or cognitive skills, or development of good moral character, is crucial to most democratic theories, as a prerequisite or concomitant or consequence of popular rule.

Rousseau, for example, saw participation in a civil state as itself a source of education in duty, in a sense of what is right, regard for others, and the consultation of reason (1957, orig. pub. 1762, pp. 18-19.) People can be deceived (hence the difference between the will of all and the

general will, p.26); it is necessary to "make people see things as they are," to "point out to them the right path which they are seeking," to provide guidance and increase public knowledge (p.35), to transform each individual into part of a much greater whole (p.36.)

Thomas Jefferson put a heavy emphasis on the need for universal public education, which he actively promoted, and for informative political debate through free and diverse newspapers.

John Stuart Mill (1958) dealt with education in an ambivalent (one hopes not disingenuous) way. While declaring that participation by the whole people in representative government promotes energetic character and sound moral instruction (ch. 3), he went on to favor severely limiting such participation, on the grounds that people were uneducated: "universal teaching must precede universal enfranchisement" (p.132.) Extra votes might be allowed to persons engaged in occupations evidencing a high level of education (p.138.)

One of the most important voices on this subject has been that of John Dewey, whose own philosophy of formal education, advocating active experience to develop capacities for thinking and reflection, was aimed at training citizens for democracy (Dewey, 1916.) He saw inquiry and communication as the keys to the functioning of democracy, as ways to make consequences known and to create an "organized, articulate Public" (Dewey, 1954, orig. pub. 1927, pp.176-184.) Dewey also wrote of democracy as the "truly human way of living;" the participation of all is necessary not only for the social welfare but to develop human beings as individuals. Human intelligence, together with pooled and cooperative experience (with all people having equal rights to express judgments) produces the knowledge and wisdom needed for collective action (Dewey, 1939, pp. 400-404.)

Education is a big subject, involving learning and instruction of many sorts, having to do with facts, causal connections and interpretations, cognitive skills, moral reasoning; and involving many individuals and institutions -- families, schools, workplaces, associations, political leadership, the mass media, and direct participation in politics. We cannot hope to make any definitive assessment of the educational system as a whole, construed in this broad fashion, but we can report our judgment about certain particular aspects of it.

First, it is obvious in a polity where only half the eligible citizens vote in presidential elections, where town meetings are rare, where most workplaces are hierarchical, and where most citizens are not mobilized by a congenial issue-oriented party or political group, that the educational potential of participation is not being fully realized. Pateman (1970), Mansbridge (1980), and Barber (1984) offer useful ideas about how this situation could be remedied. Such suggestions, in their fullest form, go beyond the individualistic utilitarian stream of democratic thinking (which, when not careful, tends to legitimize narrowly self interested behavior), and deal with the transformation of character and the fulfillment of humankind's communitarian potential.

Second, our analysis of the contents of the mass media makes it clear that the public is offered only a fraction of the political teaching that could be provided. Political figures, facing electoral incentives to be ambiguous, seldom offer serious analyses of public problems; journalism often fails to probe beneath the surface of events; neither experts nor would-be leaders of mass movements speak clearly to the public. There is room for much more and much better political information, more moral leadership, more mobilization and organization of the public for participation. Significant change would probably require different incentives and institutional arrangements on the elite level.

3. Do unpopular policies go unpublicized and escape public attention? Here (though our own evidence is scant) we are inclined to answer, "sometimes, at least." Some limitations on ordinary

people's ability to obtain and process costly political information must be taken as given (Downs, 1957), so the question is whether the information system provides -- cheaply and accessibly-- important facts about ways in which government policies deviate from the expressed preferences of the public.

A long line of research suggests that it often does not, so that elites have considerable leeway to act in unpopular ways. Schattschneider (1960) argued that when visibility is low, when the "scope of conflict" is narrow, organized groups (for example, those seeking tax loopholes in midnight meetings of the Ways and Means committee) have a good chance of prevailing over an unaware public. McConnell (1966) has made a similar point with respect to small constituencies and the cooptation of administrators. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) suggested that elites may often be able to mute the public's voice by controlling what is on the agenda -- what is discussed, what is viewed as a public problem or a possible solution. Edelman (1964) has argued that symbols are used to conceal government actions and inactions.

We do not know how often such things happen. But our own research suggests that about one third of the time public policy moves (if it changes at all) in a direction opposite to the movement of collective public opinion (Page and Shapiro, 1983, p.178.) The one third figure is suggestive of substantial slippage in democratic responsiveness, some or all of which may result from a dim spotlight that does not direct public attention to unpopular policies.

4. Do elites manipulate the public's policy preferences? This, too, is a crucial question for democratic theory. If power has a "third face" (Lukes, 1975), such that elites create or influence the very wants of the public; if, as Lindblom (1977, ch. 15) suggests, preferences are "circular," with businessmen and politicians and others strongly affecting what the public wants; if that influence is exerted in such a way as to lead people astray from their own true interests and values¹², then the most responsive political machinery in the world will not produce democratic outcomes.

Although our own work on opinion manipulation is far from complete, we have arrived at some preliminary findings which have disturbing implications. First, examination of the historical record indicates that government officials often mislead, and sometimes lie; this is particularly true with respect to foreign affairs, where government control of information is great (see Page and Shapiro, 1989.) It is common (for example) to portray opposing countries and movements as aggressive and evil, and U.S. government actions as benevolent, regardless of the facts, in order to mobilize public support for the official foreign policy. This tendency is probably built into the nation state system, which gives officials in each nation both the tools and the incentives to mislead their people for the sake of their own power and the projection of national influence.

Second, there are indications that the information presented to the public through the mass media has certain biases, or slants, or value tendencies, that may distort the public's picture of the world and lead its policy preferences astray. We see these tendencies as reflecting the nation state system and official control of information, as above, but also such factors as the capitalist character of the economy, which ensures that many powerful voices will support capitalism and oppose communism in the U.S. and abroad; the weakness of the American labor movement; and the tendency for information sources to change with shifts in party control of government (Page and

¹² True preferences can be defined, for this purpose, as preferences that would be held in the presence of full and accurate information. Full information being unavailable to even the most diligent observer, true preferences are unknowable. But reasonable inferences about deviations from them may be drawn from citizens' reliance upon systematically false or misleading information.

Shapiro, 1989.)

Some such tendencies could work through the normal operation of a free enterprise information system, even aside from special non-market control exercised by government officials and others. Political information has characteristics of a public or social good. Some kinds of information, particularly information which is of significant but small use to many different people, cannot be sold efficiently: once it is produced it is difficult to exclude people from consumption in order to force them to pay for it; and there are increasing returns to scale. Such information tends to be underproduced. Different sorts of consumers of political information therefore stand in very unequal positions. A large corporation, for example, with extensive resources and a big stake in political action, has a much better chance of finding out how a tax bill will affect it than do many unorganized taxpayers with small, diffuse interests.

Moreover, many producers of information have corporate or other interests of their own, which may affect what they put out to the public. Corporations fund foundations and think tanks that produce research studies and groom the "experts" seen on TV. The mass media are mostly owned by large corporations that are distinctly uninterested in undermining the capitalist system or upsetting their own labor relations or stirring populist tendencies among the citizenry (see Bagdikian, 1987.)

Patterns of biases or values tendencies related to those we have found have been reported in a number of studies of political communications (e.g. Gans, 1979; Gitlin, 1980; Parenti, 1986; Bennett, 1988; Miliband, 1969, ch. 7-8. Edelman, 1988, gives a compelling account of misleading political "spectacles.") But this is a realm full of controversy. Judgments of political truth and falsehood are subject to disagreement, virtually by the definition of politics; and assessments of bias must struggle with difficulties of conceptualization and measurement.¹³ Moreover, it is plain that any manipulation of preferences that occurs is not all-powerful; a striking example is the failure of barrages of publicity in the late 1970s and early 1980s to dislodge Americans from their advocacy of social welfare programs and arms control or from their distaste for aiding the Nicaraguan contras (Ferguson and Rogers, 1986, ch. 1; Rielley, 1987; Bennett, 1989.)¹⁴ Still, there is reason for concern that democracy may be undermined to some extent by systematic distortions in the information system. Careful research on the nature and extent of such distortions deserves a high priority among scholars interested in democratic theory.

5. Can the "marketplace of ideas" be counted upon to reveal political truth? It has become a prime tenet of liberal faith that, if all views are permitted free expression, truth will overcome falsehood through a competition of ideas. As Justice Holmes (1919) put it, "...the best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market...." Much earlier John Milton (1918, orig. pub. 1644) had declared: "Let her and Falsehood grapple; who ever

¹³ A helpful reminder of the potential for controversy is a letter to one of the authors from Aaron Wildavsky (May 11, 1987), discussing methodological issues and alluding to possible media biases and distortions that look quite different from those we have mentioned. Some of the conflict may be more apparent than real (for example, general support of incumbent authorities and the status quo is compatible with muckraking about individual officials' sins and follies), but some real contrasts exist, as they do in the vast and tangled communications literature. Research in this area requires great care.

¹⁴ A cynic might reply that it was unnecessary to manipulate opinion; the Reagan administration, backed by much of corporate America, was able to ignore the public's preferences and carry out a number of unpopular policies anyway, as documented in the above sources.

knew Truth put to the worse, in a free and open encounter?" (p.58.) Jefferson in his first inaugural address (1801) referred to "the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it." And John Stuart Mill (1947, orig. pub. 1859) wrote: "Wrong opinions and practices gradually yield to fact and argument" (p.19); to silence the expression of an opinion robs the human race, either of the opportunity of changing error for truth, or of "the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error" (p.16.)

Milton, Jefferson, Mill, and Holmes were all concerned chiefly with tolerating dissent and avoiding excessive restraints on speech through licensing, censorship, punishment, or the like. As Mark Graber (1988) has pointed out, the modern First Amendment arguments for free speech in terms of furthering the democratic process (arguments first articulated by Zechariah Chafee, with help from Holmes and Brandeis), in avoiding the links with economic arrangements inherent in earlier nineteenth century libertarian views, have tended also to obscure the relevance of economic resources to effective expression. They have, by so doing, implicitly assumed that the marketplace of ideas works well when left alone. Some political theorists (e.g. Barber, 1984; Fishkin, 1988), doubting this premise, have begun to explore what it would mean to guarantee informational equality to all viewpoints, and how this could be accomplished through active provision of incentives and opportunities for unmanipulated debate.

How well does the market actually work in providing accurate and accessible political information? Our discussion of preference manipulation suggests that it may not be fully effective. Possible biases in the information provided to the public may reflect an imperfect market, in which ordinary citizens cannot count on having easy access to truthful information they need, and in which both production and consumption may be dominated by actors with the most resources.¹⁵ This deserves empirical and theoretical study.

Despite an avalanche of work on information economics (much of it concerned with incorporating into economic theory considerations involving information about the price and quality of goods), when it comes to political applications the "marketplace of ideas" remains little more than a metaphor. No theoretical analysis of which we are aware grapples seriously with the question of whether or not the natural working of free enterprise economics leads to patterns of misleading political information that distort citizens' policy preferences and political choices.

V. Conclusion

Our work to date suggests that the main problems of democracy in the United States result, not from incapacities on the part of the public, but from the structure and operation, at the elite level, of the system by which the public is provided with information.

It is simply not the case that the collective policy preferences of the U.S. public are nonexistent, unknowable, capricious, or ignorant. When the public is provided with unbiased information, it is perfectly capable of responding in a sensible fashion, adjusting its policy preferences accordingly.

¹⁵ These are two distinct points. Even in a perfectly functioning market, production and consumption are ordinarily, in a quantitative sense, dominated by those with the most resources; hence there is always a danger of economic inequality overcoming political equality in politically relevant markets (e.g. if campaign contributions can be exchanged for political favors.) In addition, however, we are suggesting that markets for political information are imperfect in specific ways that additionally disadvantage those with diffuse, small needs for information.

Clearly the present information system is sufficiently effective so as to enable the public to provide us with favorable evidence of its capacities, through its responses to fifty years of survey questions. Collective deliberation does occur, and substantial political education takes place.

At the same time, we have suggested that political education -- in the broad sense of providing useful political experience and information and moral guidance to the citizenry -- is not what it could be; that concealment of (or failure to provide) relevant information sometimes permits the pursuance of unpopular policies, outside of public view; and that the public's policy preferences (including those to which government responds) may sometimes be manipulated by deceptive leaders and by flows of information subject to various biases or distortions.

V.O. Key, Jr.'s, epigram (1966, p.2), that "(t)he voice of the people is but an echo" of elite inputs, has some application outside its home domain of electoral choice. It does not tell the whole story about policy preferences, because the public has a remarkable collective capacity for reasonable political thought, even (sometimes) in the face of misleading or downright false appeals from its superiors. But information inputs do matter; they can have substantial effects on policy preferences, even to the point of bending them away from citizens' true interests and conceptions of the common good.

Thus we offer two concluding comments. First, there is little reason to fear or oppose democracy in the United States. There is no need to sneer at politicians who "read the Gallup polls" or other reliable indicators of public opinion, so long as they do so correctly. Government should pay attention to what the public wants. More democratic responsiveness, rather than less, would be all to the good. Institutional changes to that end should be encouraged.

Second, it is very much worthwhile to scrutinize and to improve the political information system. The public deserves better political education, more opportunities for participation, and better information about public policy. We cannot express it more neatly than Thomas Jefferson did, in a famous passage from his letter of September 28, 1820, to William C. Jarvis:

I know of no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves, and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them but to inform their discretion by education. (Jefferson, 1955, p.93.)

References

- Achen, Christopher H. 1975. Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response. American Political Science Review 69: 1218-1231.
- Almond, Gabriel A. 1960. The American People and Foreign Policy. New York: Praeger. Orig. pub. 1950.
- Arrow, Kenneth J. 1963. Social Choice and Individual Values. 2nd. ed. New York: Wiley. Orig. pub. 1951.
- Backrach, Peter, and Morton S. Baratz. 1962. Two Faces of Power. American Political Science Review 56: 947-952.
- Bagdikian, Ben H. 1987. The Media Monopoly. 2nd. ed. Boston: Beacon.
- Barber, Benjamin R. 1984. Strong Democracy: Participatory Politics for a New Age. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Barry, Brian. 1979. Is Democracy Special? In Philosophy, Politics and Society, Fifth Series. Ed. Peter Laslett and James L. Fishkin. New Haven: Yale University Press. Pp. 155-196.
- Barry, Brian, and Russell Hardin, eds. 1982. Rational Man and Irrational Society?: An Introduction and Sourcebook. Beverly Hills, Ca.: Sage.
- Bennett, W. Lance. 1988. News: The Politics of Illusion. 2nd. ed. New York: Longman.
- _____. 1989. Marginalizing the Majority: Conditioning Public Opinion to Accept Managerial Democracy. In Manipulating Public Opinion. Ed. Michael Margolis and Gary Mauser. Chicago: Dorsey. Forthcoming.
- Berelson, Bernard. 1952. Democratic Theory and Public Opinion. Public Opinion Quarterly 16: 313-330.
- Berelson, Bernard R., Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee. 1954. Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bessette, Joseph M. 1980. Deliberative Democracy: The Majority Principle in Republican Government. In How Democratic is the Constitution? Ed. Robert A. Goldwin and William A. Schambra. Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute. Pp. 102-116.
- Campbell, Angus, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes. 1960. The American Voter. New York: Wiley.
- Caspary, William R. 1970. The 'Mood Theory': A Study of Public Opinion and Foreign Policy. American Political Science Review 64: 536-547.
- Converse, Phillip E. 1964. The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics. In Ideology and Discontent. Ed. David E. Apter. New York: Free Press. Pp. 206-261.
- _____. 1970. Attitudes and Non-attitudes: Continuation of a Dialogue. In The

- Quantitative Analysis of Social Problems. Ed. Edward R. Tufte. Reading, Ma.: Addison-Wesley. Pp. 168-189.
- Crozier, Michael, Samuel P. Huntington and Joji Watnuki. 1975. The Crisis of Democracy: Report on the Governability of Democracies to the Trilateral Commission. New York: New York University Press.
- Dahl, Robert A. 1956. A Preface to Democratic Theory. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Davis, Otto A., and Melvin Hinich. 1966. A Mathematical Model of Policy Formation in a Democratic Society. In Mathematical Applications in Political Science, II. Ed. Joseph L. Bernd. Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press.
- _____ and Peter C. Ordeshook. 1970. An Expository Development of a Mathematical Model of the Electoral Process. American Political Science Review 64: 426-448.
- de Tocqueville, Alexis. 1954. Democracy in America. 2 vols. Ed. Phillips Bradley. New York: Random. Orig. pub. 1835, 1840.
- Dewey, John. 1916. Democracy and Education: An Introduction to The Philosophy of Education. New York: Macmillan.
- _____. 1939. Democracy and Educational Administration. In Intelligence in the Modern World. Ed. Joseph Ratner. New York: Random. Excerpt in Kariel (1970), pp. 13-16.
- _____. 1954. The Public and its Problems. Athens, O: Swallow Press. Orig. pub. 1927.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. An Economic Theory of Democracy. New York: Harper.
- Edelman, Murray. 1964. The Symbolic Uses of Politics. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press.
- _____. 1988. Constructing the Political Spectacle. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Enelow, James M., and Melvin J. Hinich. 1984. The Spatial Theory of Voting: An Introduction. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Feldman, Stanley. 1988. Structure and Consistency in Public Opinion: the Role of Core Beliefs and Values. American Journal of Political Science 32: 416-448.
- Ferguson, Thomas, and Joel Rogers. 1986. Right Turn: The Decline of the Democrats and the Future of American Politics.
- Fiorina, Morris P. 1981. Retrospective Voting in American National Elections. New Haven, Conn. Yale University Press.
- Fishkin, James S. 1988. Reconstructing the Social Contract: Towards a New Liberal Theory. Stanford, Calif. Unpublished.
- Friedrich, Carl J. 1939. Constitutional Government and Democracy: Theory and Practice in Europe

- and America. New York. Orig. pub. 1937.
- Gans, Herbert J. 1979. Deciding What's News. New York: Random.
- Gibson, James L. 1988. Political Intolerance and Political Repression During the McCarthy Red Scare. American Political Science Review 82: 511-529.
- Gitlin, Todd. 1980. The Whole World is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left. Berkeley, Calif. University of California Press.
- Graber, Mark Aaron. 1988. The Transformation of the Modern Constitutional Defense of Free Speech. New Haven, Conn. Unpublished doctoral dissertation.
- Grofman, Bernard, and Scott L. Feld. 1988. Rousseau's General Will: A Condorcetian Perspective. American Political Science Review 82: 567-576.
- Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison and John Jay. 1961. The Federalist Papers. Ed. Clinton Rossiter. New York: New American Library. Orig. pub. 1787-1788.
- Holmes, Oliver Wendell, Jr. 1919. Opinion in Abrams v. U.S. 250 U.S. 616, 630.
- Hotelling, Harold. 1929. Stability in Competition. Economic Journal 39: 41-57.
- Jefferson, Thomas. 1955. The Political Writings of Thomas Jefferson: Representative Selections. Ed. Edward Dumbauld. New York: Liberal Arts Press.
- Kariel, Henry S. 1970. Ed. Frontiers of Democratic Theory. New York: Random.
- Key, V. O., Jr. 1961. Public Opinion and American Democracy. New York: Knopf.
- _____, with the assistance of Milton C. Cummings, Jr. 1966. The Responsible Electorate: Rationality in Presidential Voting, 1936-1960. Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard University Press.
- Lindblom, Charles E. 1977. Politics and Markets. New York: Basic.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. Public Opinion. New York: Macmillan.
- _____. 1925. The Phantom Public. New York: Macmillan.
- _____. 1956. Essays in the Public Philosophy. New York: New American Library. Orig. pub. 1955.
- Lukes, Steven. 1975. Power: A Radical View. New York: Humanities Press.
- McClosky, Herbert, and John Zaller. 1984. The American Ethos: Public Attitudes toward Capitalism and Democracy. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- McConnell, Grant. 1966. Private Power and American Democracy. New York: Knopf.
- McKelvey, Richard D. 1976. Intransitivities in Multidimensional Voting Models and Some Implications for Agenda Control. Journal of Economic Theory 12: 472-482.

- McKelvey, Richard D. 1976. Intransitivities in Multidimensional Voting Models and Some Implications for Agenda Control. Journal of Economic Theory 12: 472-482.
- _____, and Peter C. Ordeshook. 1986. Information, Electoral Equilibria, and the Democratic Ideal. Journal of Politics 48: 909-937.
- Mansbridge, Jane J. 1980. Beyond Adversary Democracy. New York: Basic.
- May, Kenneth O. 1952. A Set of Independent, Necessary, and Sufficient Conditions for Simple Majority Decision. Econometrica 20: 680-684. (Reprinted in Barry and Hardin, 1982.)
- Miliband, Ralph. 1969. The State in Capitalist Society. New York: Basic.
- Mill, James. 1978. Essay on Government. In Utilitarian Logic and Politics: James Mill's Essay on Government, Macauley's critique and the ensuing debate. Ed. Jack Lively and John Rees. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Pp. 53-95. Orig. pub. 1820.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1947. On Liberty. Ed. Alburey Castell. New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts. Orig. pub. 1859.
- _____. 1958. Considerations on Representative Government. Ed. Currin V. Shields. Indianapolis, Ind.: Bobbs-Merrill. Orig. pub. 1861.
- Miller, Nicholas R. 1986. Information, Electorates, and Democracy: Some Extensions and Interpretations of the Condorcet Jury Theorem. In Information Pooling and Group Decision Making. Ed. Bernard Grofman and Guillermo Owen. Greenwich, Ct.: JAI Press. Pp. 173-192.
- Milton, John. 1918. Areopagitica, with a commentary by Sir Richard C. Jebb. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Orig. pub. 1644.
- Nie, Norman H., Sidney Verba and John R. Petrocik. 1979. The Changing American Voter. Enlrgd. ed. Cambridge: Ma.: Harvard University Press.
- Ordeshook, Peter C. 1986. Game Theory and Political Theory: An Introduction. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Page, Benjamin I. 1978. Choices and Echoes in Presidential Elections: Rational Man and Electoral Democracy. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- _____, and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1982. Changes in Americans' Policy Preferences, 1935-1979. Public Opinion Quarterly 46: 24-42.
- _____. 1983. Effects of Public Opinion on Policy. American Political Science Review 77: 175-190.
- _____. 1984. Presidents as Opinion Leaders: Some New Evidence. Policy Studies Journal 12: 649-661.
- _____. 1988a. The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Opinion Trends. In draft.

- _____. 1988b. Restraining the Whims and Passions of the Public. In The Federalist Papers and the New Institutionalism. Ed. Bernard Grofman and Donald Wittman. New York: Agathon. Forthcoming.
- _____. 1989. Educating and Manipulating the Public. In Manipulating Public Opinion. Ed. Michael Margolis and Gary Mauser. Chicago: Dorsey, 1989. Forthcoming.
- _____, and Glenn R. Dempsey. 1987. What Moves Public Opinion? American Political Science Review 81: 23-43.
- Parenti, Michael. 1986. Inventing Reality: The Politics of the Mass Media. New York: St. Martin's.
- Pateman, Carole. 1970. Participation and Democratic Theory. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rae, Douglas W. 1969. Decision Rules and Individual Values in Constitutional Choice. American Political Science Review 63: 40-53.
- Ranney, Austin. 1962. The Doctrine of Responsible Party Government: Its Origins and Present State. Urbana: University of Illinois.
- Rielly, John E. 1987. American Public Opinion and U.S. Foreign Policy 1987. Chicago: Chicago Council on Foreign Relations.
- Rousseau, Jean Jacques. 1957. The Social Contract. Ed. and trans. Charles Frankel. New York: Hafner. Orig. pub. 1762.
- Schattschneider, E. E. 1960. The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America. New York: Holt.
- Schumpeter, Joseph A. 1975. Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy. 3rd. ed. New York: Harper and Row. Orig. pub. 1942.
- Schwartz, Thomas. 1986. The Logic of Collective Choice. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sen, Amartya K. 1970. Collective Choice and Social Welfare. San Francisco: Holden-Day.
- Shapiro, Robert Y., and Benjamin I. Page. 1988. Foreign Policy and the Rational Public. Journal of Conflict Resolution 32: 211-247.
- Sniderman, Paul M., and Philip E. Tetlock. 1986. Interrelationships of Political Ideology and Public Opinion. In Political Psychology. Ed. Margaret E. Hermann. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Pp. 62-96.
- Straffin, Phillip D., Jr. 1977. Majority Rule and General Decision Rules. Theory and Decision 8: 351-360.
- Sussman, Barry. 1988. What Americans Really Think and Why Our Politicians Pay No Attention. New York: Pantheon.

Tulis, Jeffrey Kent. 1987. The Rhetorical Presidency. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

Walker, Jack L. 1966. A Critique of the Elitist Theory of Democracy. American Political Science Review 60: 285-295.