

Tides of Consent

How Public Opinion
Shapes American Politics

James A. Stimson

CAMBRIDGE

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Opinion Flows

It came down to the hostages. On the evening of November 3, 1980, hoping to win another term in the White House, Jimmy Carter was trailing in the polls. Only days before, they showed him dead even with Ronald Reagan. Now they showed a trend toward Reagan. While the public polls showed either a small Reagan lead or a dead heat, Carter knew better. He knew that Reagan led and that the lead was growing. A few days earlier, coming on the heels of a media “celebration” of the first year of captivity of American hostages in Iran, the Iranians had announced harsh new conditions for a negotiated hostage release. The Iranians understood that they had a card to play in the pressure on Carter to achieve progress before election day. Now they had played it skillfully. Deeply embarrassed by his – and the nation’s – impotence in the face of the Iranian clerics, Carter had seen his standing plummet over the hostage issue. He had tried diplomacy, and it had not worked. He had fashioned a military raid, and men had died, achieving nothing.

On Sunday, after the Iranian announcement, Carter’s pollster Pat Caddell had Reagan leading by five points. On Monday evening, election eve, a new Caddell poll put the lead at ten. It was given to Carter on Air Force One en route to his Georgia home for election day. “That’s when, frankly, we knew the gig was totally up,” Caddell said (*New York Times*, November 5, 1980). Casting his vote in Plains, Georgia, the next day, Carter failed to put forward the expected election day optimism. As if preparing in advance for a concession speech to come, he talked to his townspeople about difficult political decisions in his administration.

Election day confirmed the trend toward Reagan. He would win and by a much bigger margin than anyone thought. The trend was real. As if

to get it over and stanch the pain, Carter conceded early. He congratulated Reagan at 9:50 Eastern time, over an hour before the polls would close on the West Coast, a decision that might have turned some close races against now embittered Democratic candidates. He had wanted to do so an hour earlier, when desperate staff members did what they could to stall his desire to have it over. The campaign, it was clear, ended Monday evening on Air Force One.

We write a good deal about campaigns, the focus on who wins, who loses, and why. I want to ask a different question: Where do trends come from? Why is it that candidates surge ahead or fall behind? But that is only part of the issue. Had Jimmy Carter been, say, eleven points ahead – not unusual for a president seeking a second term – then a ten-point Reagan surge would have been a mere footnote to electoral history. So we need to think of trends of another sort and ask why this election, which should not have been close under normal circumstances, was close enough that last-minute events a world away could tip it. What was going on in the Carter presidency that made Carter vulnerable at the last? Why was Carter's standing so low? That question would force us to notice, for example, an election-year recession as the sort of thing that could make an incumbent president vulnerable.

Trends that had been in motion long before election year 1980 began also are part of the story. The stage began to be set early in the 1970s when Americans started thinking that they did not like many of the big government programs that had been popular when enacted. They began to think differently and began to want a different kind of leadership. All this was in place before Ronald Reagan became a candidate; indeed, it helps to explain why he and not someone else, someone more moderate, became the Republican candidate. Setting aside hostages and recessions, we need to understand how the profoundly conservative Ronald Reagan could have captured a nomination and how he could be a serious contender for the presidency. That will require us to understand the dynamics of public preference, why it is that the American public changes what it wants or doesn't want from government. These changes are glacial in pace as compared with even the month-to-month effects of economics, let alone the daily advances and declines of campaign momentum. The conservatism that heralded Ronald Reagan into the White House had been building for most of a decade. It had nothing at all to do with a 1979 hostage taking or a 1980 recession.

Politicians act on the public stage and the public responds. It is like a sport in which the judging comes after. But it does not come immediately

after. Some of it comes quickly, in days. Some takes weeks and months. Some takes longer still. The ebb and flow of public response is going on always, but more intensely during the peak of campaign season when attention is focused on politics. These processes, taken together, fundamentally shape what politics means. They set parameters on what government can do, on what political pitches will work, what ones won't. A crusade against government at most times and places would fall flat, would be a losing strategy. In the fall of 1980 it was a winner for Ronald Reagan. That is the class of processes that needs explanation. What flows are under way at what times? What starts them? How do they flow? How far does the tide run before it ebbs and runs back again?

We vote for president on one day every four years. If we could hold the contest over and over again, would it always come out the same? The 1980 case, a quite decisive win for Reagan, might have come out differently in October than it did in November – or perhaps in December. If it had been held in November 1979, the polls suggest that it would have ended in an easy win for Carter. That gives some perspective to interpretations that have the character of claiming that outcomes were inevitable, that one candidate won because he was the right candidate with the right message, running a good campaign. To all those we need to add, “at the right time.” Because we now know that public opinion is in flux.

The knowledge that public opinion moves gives us new power to understand American politics. We can take a familiar question, such as explaining the 1980 outcome, and answer it in the context of time and flow. What was happening day by day? What were the longer term flows on which these day-by-day movements were built? It is like waves. We understand that they move up and down. But we also understand that the up and down occurs along with larger movements, the tides. We need to understand both.

When analysts sit down to explain elections after the fact, there are three common stories. One is the campaign. If only some last-minute events, for example, the Iranian statement, had been different, the final days might have drifted in a different direction. Others focus on elections as referenda on the competence of the incumbent. In this story, Carter's problem was not the pre-election events, it was the year of inability to deal with hostages and economic misery that came before. Those who believe that elections register public choice about the direction government should pursue would have a different take altogether. What the 1980 presidential election was about, they would say, was a fundamental choice between liberal and conservative government. Voters in that year,

reacting to a perception that government had grown large and ineffective, wanted the conservative alternative. If Americans had not been drifting toward conservatism, they would say, Carter would not have needed approval or favorable events to succeed in the routine business of winning a second term.

Analysts usually adopt one of these stories and assert that it is the real account of an election. Each is plausible, offered alone. The data speak to all three and say yes, that could be the way it was. Which story is true? All have been told. All stories have theories that claim them to be the explanation. But the reality is that it takes all three. Politics is dynamic on multiple scales. Policy preferences move over decades. Approval can change substantially within a single year – and it did in 1980. And the campaign has a daily dynamic, as themes are tried out and some work, some don't.

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Rudy Giuliani was a troubled mayor. His run for the Senate was aborted by the one-two punch of a nasty impending divorce and health problems. He had been tossed out of his home, which was awkward, because his home was Gracie Mansion, New York City's official mayoral residence. And then came September 11. The World Trade Center terrorism presented Giuliani with an extraordinary challenge. His city was in crisis, the likes of which it had never seen. Giuliani stepped to the fore and engaged in some of the most extraordinary political leadership of all time. He showed courage on the streets, joining thousands of others in helping the afflicted. He grieved for the dead and exhorted the living. Most of all, in a situation that desperately called for leadership, he led. The crisis required minute-by-minute decisions of grave consequence and for which the rich history of New York City provided no precedents. He acted decisively. He was in charge, in command, from the first moments of crisis until he left office. Like a general on the front lines, he spoke to the world from the streets of New York, calmly factual and intensely emotional.

Given that bravura performance, it seems almost pointless to ask New Yorkers whether they approved of his job as mayor. But they were asked and, to no one's surprise, the previously troubled mayor emerged as a public hero.¹ George Pataki, governor of New York, also had a role to

¹ A CBS/*New York Times* poll of New Yorkers on October 12, 2001, found 94 percent of Democrats and 98 percent of Republicans expressing approval of Giuliani's crisis performance. National polls produced similar numbers.

play in the aftermath of 9/11. And his approval from the voters of New York State also soared, up by twenty points. Charles Schumer, senior senator from New York, notched a thirteen-point gain around the terrorism events. The more controversial junior senator, Hillary Clinton, gained even more, seventeen.

The governors of other states had a lesser role. It fell to them to issue statements of sympathy and to do what little other legal jurisdictions could do to aid New York in need. Notwithstanding their lesser roles, the governors' net approval also soared. Between August and September 2001, average approval for the fourteen sitting governors whose approval was assessed before and after 9/11 increased by nine points, by far the largest one-month gain ever recorded. Between August and October, Gray Davis in far-off California saw his standing rise by seventeen points. Jane Swift in Massachusetts gained sixteen between July and October. Gains were registered by Taft in Ohio, Easley in North Carolina, McCallum in Wisconsin, Perry in Texas. And so it went.² Governors somehow became more sympathetic figures, even when they had little role in the events that so moved the public.

Reaction to the events of 9/11 was to give President George W. Bush the largest increase in public approval ever recorded. Although the magnitude still impresses, the public response was far from unprecedented. That is how Americans respond to the chief executive in times of national crisis – a well-worn piece of political lore. Unlike smaller moments of crisis in our history, this one fundamentally altered the Bush presidency. Following the terrorism events and fed by support for Bush's actions against the terrorist base of operations in Afghanistan, there was a surge of public support that had not fully dissipated a year later.

Senators suddenly became more popular too. Legislative bodies have little independent role in a crisis, their chief duty being to support executive calls to action. That they did, passing bills to aid New York City, the "Patriot" Act to assist the investigation of terrorism, and supporting Bush's Afghanistan war. The Senate, controlled by the opposition Democrats, saw its net approval (the average approval of individual senators) rise by over ten points in the month after 9/11, the opposition Democrats gaining even more than Bush's Republicans.

Many survey organizations regularly ask about Congress and regularly find that Americans don't think much of their most democratic branch.

² Perhaps ironically, the president's brother Jeb in Florida was among those not much affected, gaining a single point.

Asked whether they “approve or disapprove of the way the Congress is doing its job,” the American public often finds much to disapprove. Its view was almost neutral, with 49 percent of those expressing a non-neutral opinion approving in August 2001. After the September terrorism, it went to 63 percent approving and by October was at 78 percent. Congress, after 9/11, was no longer a “public enemy.”³ And it was not only Congress. Trust in government, in general, soared in 2001 to levels never before seen; the number asserting trust more than doubling after September 11.

We don’t know about most individual members of Congress. Congressional districts are unmatched to normal survey sampling units. Nor do we know about lesser state officials or the huge numbers of people who administer local government. But clearly there was a pattern in the public response to terrorism. People are asked how a body such as Congress, or the president, senators, or governors are doing their jobs. When the response is so uniform, as it was after 9/11, that response must reflect something more than simple personnel evaluation. That something is a change in how people feel about government in all its aspects. It is a dynamic in which people reevaluate long-standing prejudices and draw on new considerations.

People do not normally think about public life, do not care much whether their senator or governor is doing a good job. That doesn’t have much to do with daily life. Crisis changes that. It makes people look to government to act and notice when it has acted. The government they see is both unified and responsive to public demands, and they like those things.

POLICY PREFERENCES

Consider a story devoid of crisis, just normal American politics. The American public was ready in the late 1970s to see government scaled back, to do less of what it did. After the Vietnam War and then the Watergate scandal vacated the center stage of American politics, people began to experience a long-delayed reaction to the government-expanding policies of the 1960s. They began to want less of what government was doing.

Spending on domestic priorities, education, environment, cities, health care, and so forth is popular. Many more people usually advocate doing more than less. And so it was in the late 1970s. In 1977, asked about

³ The phrase is from *Congress as Public Enemy* (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse 1996).

spending on education, for example, 48 percent said it was too little and only 10 percent said too much. On environment it was 48 to 11. But perspective is everything here. These are low points; support for doing more was usually stronger. On other issues the numbers were different, but the pattern was the same. Spending was popular on average, but its popularity was at a low point in the final years of the 1970s and in the 1980 election year.

Ronald Reagan sought a mandate to cut taxes and spending and believed that his 1980 triumph over Jimmy Carter gave him one. In early 1981 he cut taxes. And at the same time he trimmed back the growth rates of domestic programs,⁴ pretty much across the board, building in new spending on defense programs at the same time. The voters seemed to have spoken and they seemed to have gotten what they said they wanted. Taxes were cut and domestic spending was restrained, both important changes in direction for America.

By 1982 a new General Social Survey study, asking the same questions of a new sample, found support for more education spending moving to 56 percent (from 53% in 1980, the last previous study). A three-point movement is about at the limit we can expect from chance fluctuation and thus would not be taken as a signal of important movement. On environmental questions preferences also moved toward more spending, but by only two points. The 1983 study found another three-point gain on education and four on environment. These one-year movements are easy to write off. Just a few points, just a few issues. But the pattern was quite general. On most of the things that could tap basic attitudes toward government, you would see the same two- or three- or four-point changes from one year to the next. And when you put the years back to back, the size of the changes can no longer be ascribed to chance. But they don't yet connote a trend.

But a trend was indeed under way. Something was going on out in the country. Millions of people, having moved away from supporting government spending in the late 1970s, were moving back in support in the 1980s. Those millions were barely perceptible in the survey numbers and hardly noticed in Washington. The percentages of those who thought that "too little" was being spent on education moved from 60 in 1983 to 64 in 1984, down to 60 in 1985, then 61 in 1986, 62 in 1987, 64 in 1988.

⁴ The Reagan domestic budget revisions were called "cuts," by both Reagan and his opponents, but in most cases they were cuts from projected growth rates, not absolute reductions in dollar spending.

And the opposite numbers advocating “too much” fell at the same time. Over the eight years of the Reagan administration the percentages moved from 53 to 10 (83% “too little”) to 64 to 4 (94%). On environment it was the same, moving from 48 to 17 (74%) in 1980 to 65 to 5 (93%) at the close of the administration.

Then Vice President Bush, seeking to succeed Reagan in 1988, was one of those who noticed the movement in sentiment. He declared his brand of conservatism “kinder and gentler” – and did not have to say kinder and gentler than who’s. The relative conservatism that had been an asset to Reagan in 1980 was not there for Bush, who wisely shifted the agenda to the symbolic side of liberalism – race and civil liberties in particular – because there was no leverage in attacking the operational side of liberalism: expansive government domestic programs.

With a conservative, albeit “kinder and gentler” president in the White House, the trend out in the country continued. On issue after issue, the movement during Bush’s four years was the same: away from conservatism and toward liberalism. Opinions were in motion across the sweep of issue concerns called the New Deal, the welfare state, or big government. People wanted more government. “Big government” itself is not a popular symbol. But the things of which it is composed were popular. “I am for a smaller, leaner government,” people would say, except for education, except for the environment, except for urban mass transit, except on racial equality, except Social Security (and of course Medicare), except health care, gun control, and on and on. Even the always unloved welfare programs drew substantially more support by the end of Bush’s term than they had twelve years before. The exceptions were nearly all the things that government did.⁵

When George Bush sought a second term in 1992 these little changes that went mostly unnoticed had created an electorate dramatically more like that which had elected John Kennedy and Lyndon Johnson than anything seen in the subsequent three decades. It was an uphill struggle against Bill Clinton, who wanted to put government to work addressing problems that people cared about. Bush also had an unhappy economic legacy. Although the national economy was starting to turn during 1992, voters were pessimistic. But it did not help that Bush’s proposals to do better were based on a conservatism that no longer worked with the public.

⁵ But in the whole panoply of domestic concerns there were two genuine exceptions to the liberalizing trend: abortion (on which there was no movement at all) and crime, where attitudes continued to shift toward the punitive end of the scale.

The slow shift of public opinion is one of the central forces of American politics. Very different and very much less noticed than the quick responses to election year momentum or to national crisis, opinion moved by the accretion of ordinary people's experience with politics is so slow one can barely see it, so powerful that nothing stands in its way.

In three stories about opinion change one thing is constant. In all three, opinion moves. Important things happen in politics because opinion at one time is different from what it was earlier. But though motion is constant, its pace is very different. The dynamic of response to crisis can begin in minutes. America was different by dinnertime on September 11 than it had been at breakfast. Responses to the cumulative successes and failures of government are more leisurely, taking weeks and months. And the dynamic of changing preferences is so glacial that its evidence takes multiple years to leave a visible path.

This book is about all three dynamics. It is about how public opinion ebbs and flows over time, what moves it, why it moves, and what we can understand about predicting and explaining those movements. Imagine an eddy on top of a wave riding on a tide and you have a picture of public opinion flows in American politics. Some movement is slow and fundamental, some quick and responsive. The day-to-day usually doesn't matter much. But it does when it is the final act of the election drama. There trends of a day or two, taken at the *right* day or two, can be as consequential in impact as movements of a decade. Movements that take decades to run to completion have cumulative effects of fundamental consequence.

SO, WHAT'S NEW?

Survey researchers have been out in the field asking ordinary people their views for about seven decades or so, doing it regularly and seriously for about five. So what is there that we don't already know? In fact, we haven't known much at all about how public opinion moves, how, if at all, it responds to the events of politics or whether its movements are consequential.

Part of why we haven't known these things is that the early decades of opinion research were characterized by an implicit belief that opinions were more or less fixed. Not knowing anything at the outset about how people responded to politics and what they believed, it was reasonable to assume there was a fixed reality out there in want of description. So opinion researchers set out to do that description, imagining all the different questions that might elicit different pieces of the opinion jigsaw puzzle. It

was a necessary first step. It appears that they sought to cover the ground as thoroughly as possible, imagining all the different questions that might be asked. And it also appears (and this is more surmise than fact) that they regarded asking the same question more than once as a wasted opportunity, and perhaps even akin to plagiarism. Researchers were supposed to write their own questions, not use those that had previously been used.⁶

Thus the early decades of opinion research produced no evidence of opinion change, the first requisite of which is repeating the same queries over time. It takes many years of measuring things before we have rich enough data to see movements. Imagine forecasting the weather if what we had for data were one or two or three or four measurements of key variables (and with so few measurements, we wouldn't know what was key). The whole story of weather is dynamic, how pressure systems interact with jet streams and heat and moisture sources to produce the rain or shine we see. Take away those dynamics, and what is left is a forecast that today might look a lot like yesterday, but also it might not!

That's about where we have been in politics. We know the dynamics matter, but we are only beginning to have enough measures to study them. We are beginning to learn about opinion dynamics. Much of what we know we have learned in the last decade.⁷ That work is not particularly accessible, because it is burdened with thousands of details, each question treated as a thing in itself. Imagine having thousands of temperature, pressure, and wind-speed movements and having to figure out what they mean. They are ultimately the data required by rich understandings of meteorology, but as raw data they aren't very useful. To arrive at a forecast

⁶ A technical issue, the form of question wording, also had a pernicious influence on evidence of opinion change. Early studies relied heavily on the "Likert" question format, where an assertion is read and then the respondent is asked to agree or disagree with it. Because people's opinions were so lightly held (see Chapter 2), they tended to agree with the assertions much more often than disagree. We now understand that we were dealing with the absence of real opinions, a situation in which plausible-sounding assertions easily convince the respondent to agree. Since we were creating opinions on the spot, in addition to measuring them, the questions were poor measures of real opinion. When that was recognized, survey organizations began to use variations on a forced choice format, which produces better data. The style is to take two opposite, but plausible sounding assertions, pair them, and then have the respondent choose between them. The question wording, "Some people think . . . whereas others think . . ." encourages respondents to think that both are reasonable positions so as not to tip the response one way or the other. When organizations began to use these other formats, all the early work using Likert questions was orphaned because the two question forms do not produce comparable answers.

⁷ See, in particular, Stimson 1991, 1998; Mayer 1992; Page and Shapiro 1992; Zaller 1992; Wlezien 1995; Kellstedt 2000; and Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002.

we care about, the raw data have to be digested. That has been the state of public opinion: lots of raw data.

Recording meteorological data taxes the technological capacity of data storage; there is so much of it. Public opinion is not that overwhelming. But still, the raw data for this book, displayed as questions and answers in a table for each, would run to perhaps 20,000 pages of detail. And this is the data aggregated for the nation. A display of raw data, what each respondent said to each question, begins to rival the proportions of documenting the weather. The dominant style of writing about public opinion displays those national sample aggregates, called “marginals,” short for “marginal totals.” It says, on issue after issue, “in response to the question . . .,” “ x percent said y .” The flood of detail quickly surpasses reader interest.

On top of that the work on opinion dynamics is technical, a critique that applies squarely to my own contributions as well as those of others. What we have done in the last decade begins to tell the story of opinion dynamics in real politics, but most of the people who care about real politics would not want to read it. It is too full of the apparatus of social research, lengthy tomes on concepts, measures, and analytic designs. These things are all necessary, but they aren't anyone's idea of good reading, and they are for all practical purposes inaccessible to most of those who care about understanding politics.

This book is for readers who care about politics and want to know how politics is driven by opinion dynamics. Everything in it is based on the scientific work on concepts, measures, analyses, and tests, but it is written without the overlay of social science.

As a means to be both comprehensive and readable, most treatment of opinion in this book is summaries of multiple indicators. It combines numerous questions with similar focus on topics. Sometimes these are as narrow as the level of involvement of the federal government in, say, education, sometimes as broad as just basic liberalism or conservatism of domestic policy preferences across the board. That gets us away from those tens of thousands of pages of raw data and also presents full movements in regular time series as opposed to the raw data, which are spotty and irregular. Instead of thousands of pressure readings – to continue our weather metaphor – we'll see isobar maps. The one presents the same data as the other, but the latter is a simple picture of what matters instead of the overwhelming detail.

This is unusual in writing about public opinion, where there is great skepticism about combining and generalizing the results of surveys. That

skepticism results from the excesses of our past when, not realizing how sensitive question wording could be, analysts combined information from different series and ended up creating artificial movements, apparent trends that were due to the change of question wording, not real change of opinion. The reader is going to have to trust that I do not do that. And I don't. Having spent years developing a technology to estimate the dimensions of opinion that underlie survey responses – the isobars from the pressure readings – I am sensitive to question comparability issues, which are fully under control in these analyses.⁸

Note the occasional use of the adjective “domestic.” That reflects a basic fact of American public opinion, that the domestic policy agenda is fundamentally different from foreign policy. While many things that seem separate are seen to move together, domestic and foreign opinions do not. Foreign policy controversies engage considerations entirely different from the domestic realm. All of the analysis that follows is about domestic politics.

A THEORY OF PUBLIC OPINION

Ordinary people are ignorant *and* calculating about politics. They know so little about public life that it is often hard to tell something from nothing, to find any fact-based beliefs. And they have goals, private and public, they think a little about how to achieve them, and they act on their thoughts. Usually these two sides of human behavior, ignorant and calculating, are forced into confrontation. We want people to be ignorant and irrational, on the one hand, or informed and calculating, on the other. It makes for a consistent view of the human condition. But it is wrong.

Both poles of consistency have failed to square with the evidence. “Informed and calculating” was first to go. We believed, before we seriously got about the business of studying ordinary people, that we would find in them the democratic citizens that our quasi-religious commitment to democracy demanded. We thought they would have views like the participants of a Georgetown cocktail party, that they would take one side or the other of public debates and would have a system of beliefs, perhaps even a public philosophy, that would support their positions.⁹

⁸ To keep the book about politics, the dimensional technology itself does not appear in these pages. The technologically curious can see Chapter 3 and the appendix of Stimson 1998.

⁹ Of course, we can't really know what “we” thought about public opinion in an era in which no systematic study was possible. Surely, elected politicians must always have

Such a view survived a couple thousand years of speculation about the public. Its death was quick and brutal when early students of public opinion actually went out and interviewed ordinary people in surveys. The tone of astonishment of these first reports is testimony to the wild unreality of the portrait we expected to see. What those studies found was that ordinary Americans knew almost nothing about public affairs and appeared to care about issues as much as they knew: almost not at all. Their beliefs were a scattering of unrelated ideas, often mutually contradictory. Structure was nowhere to be found. Almost equally astonishing is the fact that most cared little about the views they politely professed in response to interviewer's questions. They said so. And their behavior backed up the claim. Confronted with any counterargument, they would change sides. The early analysts were terrified to discover that this shallowness of opinion holding was so great that innocent choices to use one word rather than another in survey questions would have large effects on the answers obtained.

The scientific study of public opinion began roughly at the same time as did the Cold War between East and West. One of the early findings was that most Americans, asked about "Russia," were not as hostile as would have been expected from the times. Posing the same question about the "Soviet Union," in contrast, produced the expected antagonism. And if the adjective "Communist" were added to the label, the answers were so one-sided as to make the questions unworkable; they produced only a single response. And yet these were all the same question. Thus, opinions were so lightly held that they were strongly influenced by the shape of the question asked. And this beyond doubt was the most intense issue of the times.

And we learned also that mere willingness to express a view did not indicate intensity of feeling. We found that people would also answer nonsense questions. Asked, for example, to express their feelings of warmth or coldness toward people and groups, many respondents proved willing also to express feelings toward individuals and groups that did not exist. And the numbers who rated the nonexistent were not notably smaller than those expressing a view about real people and real groups.

On close analysis, it also became apparent that inconsistency was the hallmark of public opinion. Not only was it the case that people were inconsistent in expressed views toward objects that informed observers

known that philosophy had limited power to win elections. We know this to be true from the simplistic appeals that have characterized political campaigns throughout history.

thought went together. That conundrum could be explained by clever theories about the nature of consistency. But Converse's (1964) classic demonstration that inconsistency was also widespread in people's answers to the same questions over time had no easy escape. Converse concluded that much of expressed public opinion was what he called "nonattitudes," the doorstep creation of survey responses by respondents who had no true opinions at all. Because the creation of nonattitudes was essentially a random process, it yielded a different random result on each occasion, an explanation of over-time inconsistency. (This is a conclusion I revisit.)

Thus it seemed obvious that citizens were completely inept, totally unprepared to play their expected role in a democracy. It is hard to overstate the evidence of public ignorance, hard to express the analyst's initial despair at finding out what isn't known by people on the street. Everyone who has looked at survey data on public knowledge and preference has experienced it. The gap between what democracy seems to demand of voters and what voters supply is just immense.

It was natural in the face of this evidence to conclude, as most early analysts did, that voters were beyond understanding as rational actors. If they knew almost nothing of public affairs, it was an easy step to conclude further that they were pawns in the game of politics, bereft of real preferences and unable to calculate the consequences of their acts.

The conclusion that seemed to follow – that citizens act without purpose or calculation in politics – will also turn out to be wrong. But showing that first requires developing some structure.

SOME POSTULATES ABOUT OPINION MOVEMENT

I pause here to lay out some fundamentals, what I believe to be generally true about public opinion. The purpose is to construct the view of movements that will underlie the rest of the book. These are the building blocks.

Some People Some of the Time Pay Attention to Government

"Some" is not a powerful word. In formal logic it means "at least one." I can satisfy that all by myself. But I mean more. I mean "some" as in "enough to matter." I mean nontrivial numbers. Perhaps it is on the order of saying that over a given period of time at least 10 percent care about *something* that the government does and at some unusual times large numbers care about something unusually important or visible.

Politics does not require full-time spectators. Nobody needs to pay attention to everything that stimulates debate in the Washington community. And I don't assume that every citizen will care about even one thing. A society doesn't need and maybe couldn't even tolerate that level of involvement. How much attention is necessary for a meaningful interaction? All that is required is that the very most visible acts of, say, a year or a presidential term draw the attention of some small number of people.

We can quantify some of this. We know that nontrivial numbers of Americans subscribe to news-laden national newspapers such as the *New York Times* or the *Wall Street Journal* and that larger numbers watch serious news programs on television such as *NewsHour* on PBS or are informed by the excellent news coverage of National Public Radio.¹⁰ And some actually read the news portions of their daily local papers and not merely the funnies, horoscopes, advice to the lovelorn, and sports. And we know something about the peak involvement of normally inattentive people. About half of all Americans vote once every four years, something over 30 percent at least once every two years. Presidential debates are infrequent, but have large viewership when they occur. At the outer extreme, the crisis of September 11 and its aftermath engaged virtually all living Americans.

The point of this excursion is this: The overwhelming evidence of lack of interest and involvement in public affairs by ordinary Americans is indisputable. But the conclusion that *nobody* pays attention does not follow. Some people some of the time pay attention to government.

Some People Some of the Time Care What Government Does

Paying attention does not imply caring (although paying attention does impose an opportunity cost, time that might have been spent doing something else, which does imply motivation of some sort). Many people say that they don't care who wins elections. But there is evidence that some do. The long recount of the Bush versus Gore contest in Florida carried news ratings for almost two months in 2000. (But we shouldn't get carried away here; it was no match for the O. J. Simpson trial.) But the assumption is safe: Some people some of the time care what government does.

A much larger number of people, essentially everybody, cares about the things government *doesn't* do. What government doesn't do is of course

¹⁰ Larger numbers, of course, watch network and cable news programs, where political news is intermixed with much ratings-driven shock and entertainment material.

an infinite list of possibilities, which have the common feature that they are deeply unpopular.

The public would be excited, often opposed, to radical changes in American life and politics. Politicians know this, of course, and consequently do not propose truly radical changes. So long as they restrict public debate to little changes around the edges, most citizens are comfortable ignoring the daily flow of public activity.

People care about abortion, for example, pro and con. We have a continuing discussion about changes in the abortion law. Proposals are things on the order of requiring parental consent for under-age women seeking an abortion. This excites the subset of people interested in public issues or just this one, but its importance is mainly symbolic: If it passes or fails, it is a victory for one side of the debate and hints that future policy changes might go in the same direction. Most Americans are tuned out of this debate. Even though they care about abortion, they don't care enough to get involved in the back-and-forth over changes at the margin.

Now imagine that politicians get serious about the issue and go all the way, completely eliminating legal abortion or (less drastically) completely eliminating all legal impediments to abortion rights. Would most Americans care about this change? They would. We could reasonably expect huge public response and truly sweeping political repercussions. Thus the potential to care about radical changes, however hypothetical (because we don't witness radical changes), is a quite real curb on politicians' behavior.¹¹

Some of Those Who Pay No Attention to Government Will Nonetheless Form Public Opinions

Without any information flow whatsoever on the topic of politics (or just about anything else), one can form a view of what is good or bad simply by adopting the views of someone else who does pay attention. This process is everywhere. We all engage in specialization of labor, paying attention to a small number of things that we find interesting and pretty much ignoring

¹¹ The evidence for the point is on the order of the dog that famously didn't bark. In the era in which the parties have aligned themselves for and against abortion, they have produced white-hot campaign rhetoric on the issue. But given unified control of government, both have backed away from the positions of campaign rhetoric and instead engaged in the normal politics of marginal change, Democrats proposing restrictions on demonstrators at abortion clinics, Republicans proposing to allow states freedom to curtail abortion rights in certain fairly restrictive circumstances.

everything else. If we are then called on to form a view of the “everything else” and we know someone who does pay some attention, someone we like and trust, we simply adopt his or her views. It is a sensible thing to do. For if the thing to be evaluated is in the category “not important enough to pay attention to,” then adopting the views of a trusted person is smarter than the alternatives of flipping a coin or paying the cost of being informed.

Thus those who pay no attention to government or politics will sometimes have political opinions. Such opinions will often not appear orderly with regard to other things the person knows or believes, for they didn’t in fact come from the person in question. But if you adopt someone else’s view of politics – and the view adopted was responsive to what was going on in Washington – then notwithstanding the broken line of cause and effect, *your view will be orderly, responsive to what really happened*. Thus we may conclude that the set of those who hold orderly public views will include both those who pay attention and some of those who do not.

Much Public Opinion Is Media-Influenced

We regularly argue along partisan and ideological lines about media slant toward one or the other side in American politics. But arguments about slant miss the important action. When the media carry debates between forceful opponents, we don’t expect to find media influence, and the evidence pretty much says that there is little.¹² But it is quite wrong to assume that all issues get two-sided treatment. There are many matters where one side is dominant and is the only message the public hears.

“Government,” for example, is always a villain, never a hero of media stories. That is because the press assigns itself the role of watchdog, taking seriously the responsibility of reporting misdeeds in the public order. The press has no responsibility to be balanced on this matter. And stories that reported wise, virtuous, and efficient government activities would usually fail the criteria of newsworthiness. On government waste, politicians get into the act too. Conservatives rail about welfare, liberals about defense, and what the public hears from both sides is that government is wasteful. There is no debate about whether there is waste; the debate is only about

¹² What the evidence does show, however, is that media play an influential role in setting the public agenda by choosing to cover some issues and not others. The common statement is that media do not tell people what to think, but they do tell them what to think about. See Kellstedt (2003) for an extension of this idea into the matter of shaping opinions about race.

where waste is to be found. And then in politics, “waste” comes to mean “money spent on purposes I don’t like,” as opposed to the normal financial connotation, that is, money spent that does not serve any purpose.

The president of the United States has friends and foes. The friends will vigorously defend his or her performance in office.¹³ Congress, in contrast, has only foes. There is no public voice raised in the defense of the institution. Indeed, Richard Fenno (1978) reports that members of Congress are among its most vociferous and consistent critics. “That place is a mess,” they say to their constituents. “Send me there to straighten it out.” That Congress is usually unloved doesn’t require much explanation.

Many of the goals of government programs are so popular that one side of a potential debate censors itself. Americans revere good education and a clean environment, for example. But even though education and environment programs have opponents, those opponents steer clear of public opposition. Those, for example, who want to limit activities in education will argue around the edges, that the programs are flawed, that money is wasted, and so forth. What they do not argue (because they know the argument is a loser) is that education isn’t worth the money. Environmental regulation is attacked as bureaucratic, wasteful, insensitive to economic realities, and so forth. But no one will argue in public that a clean environment isn’t worth the cost.

The real slant in all these cases comes from self-censorship. The problem isn’t merely that coverage of the debate reflects only one side; it is that only one side is publicly aired. The press cannot (and should not) create debates that do not exist. We tend to think of politics always as two-sided and assume that political issues will usually produce two-sided debates. But it is not in the self-interest of real politicians to defend unpopular positions. So two-sided issue debates are not universal; they tend to occur only in cases where the issue is framed such that the two sides are about equally numerous and popular.

The result of one-sided debates is what all would expect. Public opinion reflects only that one side. And this is circular: Because one side is more popular, only that side is heard, and that makes it even more popular, which makes it less likely that the other side will be heard, and on and on. It would be useful for the public order if this were not true. It would be helpful to have even-handed assessments of how much education or environment are worth, whether government is actually wasteful, whether

¹³ Richard Nixon, in his final days in office, illustrates the limit of the assertion. That one president at that one time had no public friends.

Congress is congenitally stupid, and so forth. But in a market system where the coinage is votes, that is not going to happen.

In each of the cases I have illustrated there is an ideological slant that results, left or right. What can we say in sum? Because what the public wants to hear determines which positions are self-censored, we can reasonably expect the net effect of one-sided treatments to be neutral relative to public opinion. The bias is toward the middle. Arguments that divide more or less at the center of public opinion get aired in the public media. Ideas and positions that, whatever their intellectual merit, cannot draw majority support are systematically suppressed by self-interested politicians, who wage their wars on fronts where they can win.

These postulates about information and opinion are static; they inform us about who might have actual opinions, how numerous they are, and what those opinions might be. Now think about the public, the aggregate of all those individual views. Think of it as an *it*. And now I ask, how does it move over time? What can we learn about how the public responds to political events from what we know?

Opinion Dynamics: Change in Response to Events

When we ask what happens to this aggregate public and what properties it has, the result will be counterintuitive for many readers. The result will be opinion movements that are almost totally dominated by the orderly responses of those who pay some attention. The electorate, the aggregate of the people, will display a wholly orderly response to government. How can this be? What is the sleight-of-hand that pulls this rabbit from the magician's hat? The answer is two-fold: It is the mathematics of aggregation gain and it is opinion leadership by the better informed.

Aggregation Gain

Aggregation accentuates the orderly over the disorderly, the signal over the noise. When you sum up the patterns in which people respond to events, some will be common – many people responding the same way at the same time – and many will be idiosyncratic. Multiple “copies” of responses that are similar gain force; they add up. Idiosyncratic (or random) responses do not add up; they tend to cancel one another. If some rats in a maze run toward the food and others go off in random directions, the average for all is toward the food. If some people become more conservative when government undertakes liberal actions and others respond randomly, then the public on average becomes more conservative.

Notice that the argument is about orderly, not correct behavior. Aggregation will accentuate anything that is regular; it has no will, no consciousness to select better over worse. AM radio is built on the principle of aggregation gain; that is what allows plucking a weak signal out of an environment filled by static. But if the wrong signal is at the frequency you tune to – a nearby station or maybe your neighbor’s garage door opener – that wrong signal, also orderly, also gets amplified.

The conclusion I have been building to is this: if just some people pay attention to politics and just some care a little bit about it – never mind all those who don’t pay attention and don’t care – the average of opinions will predominantly reflect those who pay attention and care. It is precisely this average we see when we see *public* opinion.

Opinion Leadership

Imagine a perverse specialization of labor in which the uncaring and uninformed were as likely to influence the views of the caring and informed as vice versa. That would weaken the orderliness of opinion, sometimes replacing the orderly with the random. But of course specialization of knowledge has a logic that leads to the reverse. Those who have knowledge are more likely to influence those who don’t than the other way around. We say, “I haven’t paid any attention to x and now I need to make a decision about it. I wonder who can tell me what to do?” We seek to be influenced when we don’t know or care very much. We are so accustomed to politics as seeking to influence, as people pressing their views on others, that it is easy to forget the reality that most people do not care much about politics and do not have views. To avoid the cost of paying attention to a subject that does not interest them, they are happy to be influenced by others. Because people who don’t know are likely to be influenced by those who do, their responses are likely to carry the same orderliness as the informed response.

Imagine a little conversation. You say to me, “George W. Bush is too conservative.” I don’t know what “conservative” means and I don’t care about what I don’t know. But if I then repeat the claim in a survey or act on it in the voting booth, then your orderly views become mine. Bush’s actions produced your orderly response because you understood them. They produced an equally orderly response in me without understanding. When this conversation is repeated a thousand times over, it produces a more orderly public response. “The public” thus becomes much more orderly than the average of individuals. The electorate is a lot smarter than the voters.

The public opinion of this book is orderly. It has patterns, that is, which can be understood as predictable responses to the real world events that it witnesses.¹⁴ That does not mean that it is wise, that its beliefs about facts are correct, or that its judgment is good. There is ample evidence that all these are sometimes false. They are things we would like to believe about public opinion, things that would be supportive of a commitment to democratic ideals. But like the idea that jury verdicts are always correct, it takes an argument from faith, not fact, to make them true.

But just orderly is quite a lot, dramatically contrary to much that is written about public opinion. Because almost everything we know about opinion comes from the study of individual opinion holding, we have hugely underestimated the aggregate order. We have theories that assert that opinion is uninformed (and it is *on average*) and emphasize opinion holding as filling a psychological need. That it might be a simple response to what is going on in politics is a fairly radical assertion, one that can be made only about the orderly aggregate.

Because all that it takes is for some few to pay attention, public opinion becomes more than just orderly; it becomes a sensitive barometer. It moves not only in response to big and exciting events; it also tracks more subtle and normal politics. Because its movements are meaningful, it has a lot to tell us about politics in Washington. Because they are also consequential for elections and policy making – and the evidence is now clear that they are (Erikson et al. 2002) – these movements send a message back in the other direction too.

Public opinion is the drive wheel of American politics in my view and in this book. That is not because many in the public care or that any care very much. All it takes is that some care and then the rest follow. When some care, then events inside the Beltway will produce responses outside it. Those responses are what matters.

DESIGN OF THE BOOK

The focus of Chapter 2 is long-term flows of opinion. I ask what Americans want from government and how that preference moves over decades of political time. The chapter gets beneath the raw data on preferences

¹⁴ Page and Shapiro 1992 assert also that it is “rational,” that its actions are in part calculated to achieve goals. I am inclined to agree. But I stop short of making that claim myself because (1) the matter of rationality is contentious and pursuing it would require a lengthy discussion, and (2) the evidence for it would have to come from materials beyond the scope of this book. See Erikson et al. 2002.

to observe domains of unified views; how, for example, Americans feel about education or crime or whether to impose controls on handguns. It suggests that these flows move together and that something more basic ties guns to education to welfare and so on.

Chapter 3 takes up the matter of ideology, the bundling of attitudes about many different issues into coherent systems that encapsulate all. It deals particularly with novel issues, asking why they arise and then what happens to them over time. Its theory of issue evolution predicts that the party system eventually converts them into variations of left and right, liberalism and conservatism. The chapter closes with a look at a strange phenomenon of American politics, that conservative symbols are more popular than liberal ones at the same time as liberal views on specific controversies outweigh conservative ones.

Chapter 4 turns to an altogether different sort of dynamics, the day-to-day horse race of the presidential campaign. It focuses on what the polls do and don't mean and on typical patterns of the stretch run and assesses what matters in a presidential campaign, what key events produce winners and losers.

Chapter 5 turns to public response to government between the campaigns, asking what it is that people like and dislike and why there are systematic patterns in approving and disapproving individual officeholders as well as institutions such as Congress. It concludes that approval and trust are a syndrome of attitudes that really have quite little to do with the specific acts of those being evaluated.

Chapter 6 attempts to make sense of the whole. It argues that the emergent intelligence of electorates needs to be understood as a function of how small are the changes necessary to move politics. It reinterprets politics in light of the view that it is a specialized subset of citizens, and not an obvious one, that produces almost all the systematic change in our politics.