Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics

*Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People*

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Is public opinion a beloved but unreal myth like the unicorn? Or a thing out there in the garden like an elephant, of which sight-impaired, competing methodologists measure different parts? Or a fuzzy set of probabilities like the electron, both wave and particle, perhaps of inherently uncertain location? Or does it include all of the above? ...If we want to measure public opinion, we need to decide which of several meanings we are interested in.

– Allen Barton (1998)

The problem is not what public opinion is, but what different sets of beliefs lead us to do with it in the development and conduct of systems of politics.

– David Minar (1960: 44)

When V. O. Key (1966) described the public as an "echo chamber," he underscored the importance of political leadership to the quality of the public's collective decisions. So long as the public was provided with good information and clear alternatives, Key argued, it would make reasonable and even responsible choices. This book has argued to the contrary that the public as an echo chamber is not acoustically perfect, and that the quality of collective preferences is not merely a function of the leadership and information provided to citizens. The low levels and uneven social distribution of political knowledge ensure that collective preferences reflect some voices better than others, and despite the optimism of revisionist arguments to the contrary, the mass public is often unable to compensate for its inattentiveness to politics.

The presence of information effects calls into question many of the ways public opinion data are used by political leaders, journalists, and citizens. Since the impact of information effects is observable and to some
extent predictable, it may be possible to improve on the standard uses of survey data by flagging those collective preferences with obvious representational problems. But the weight of evidence developed in preceding chapters also suggests the need to revise our expectations about the kind of contribution that collective preferences might provide to democratic politics. While some might conclude in light of these findings that surveys hinder rather than help democratic rule, it is also possible that opinion surveys are better suited to serve different roles or to provide other kinds of information than we seem to expect of them.

This final chapter summarizes the conclusions of this study and suggests ways that survey organizations, political leaders, and news outlets can change the manner in which they administer, interpret, and report opinion polls to address the impact of information effects. It then turns to the question of what roles (if any) collective preferences might usefully play in the governance of democracies.

**MAJOR FINDINGS**

While heuristic shortcuts, on-line processing, and collective rationality are often thought to help the mass public compensate for its unfamiliarity with public affairs, this study shows that their expected benefits often fail to materialize. Judgmental shortcuts and on-line processing may help citizens provide opinions more meaningful than they might otherwise be, but they do not compensate for want of political expertise. Because ill-informed survey respondents tend to behave differently than models of collective rationality expect them to, aggregating individual opinions turns out to be a surprisingly inefficient way to pool information dispersed across a mass public. Moreover, all of these potential remedies to the public’s disengagement from politics overlook a fundamental problem: some kinds of people are more informed than others, and the social distribution of political knowledge bears on the quality of political representation provided by collective preferences.

There appear to be two primary mechanisms by which uneven levels of political knowledge undermine representation. The first is by affecting the demographic correspondence between a survey sample and the group of people who give substantive responses. Those poorly informed about politics tend to give "don't know" and "no opinion" responses at higher rates than more knowledgeable people. This tendency leaves the group of opinion givers disproportionately well educated, affluent, male, white, middle-aged, and partisan relative to the population they are supposed to represent. As a consequence, the particular needs, wants, and values expressed by these relatively knowledgeable groups tend to carry more numerical weight in collective preferences than they would if all voices in a population spoke in proportion to their numbers.

The second way that information asymmetries affect representation is by encouraging less knowledgeable respondents to rely on a limited number of prominent considerations when forming and expressing policy preferences. As a consequence, the opinions of ill-informed people are often quite similar to one another, and ill-informed opinion tends to distribute less evenly across response categories than well-informed opinion. Contrary to the predictions of collective rationality arguments, these dispersion effects generally cause the opinions of ill-informed rather than well-informed people to have an exaggerated influence over the shape of collective preferences.

Correcting for the low levels and uneven social distribution of political knowledge reveals that many collective policy preferences would look quite different if all respondents were equally well informed about politics. The biases in collective preferences brought about by information effects are most clearly revealed by simulating measures of fully informed opinion based on the actual opinions that respondents provide, although the degree of divergence in the opinions of ill- and well-informed respondents can also be used as a rough gauge of information effects. An analysis of these biases suggests that citizen disinterest in politics leads collective preferences to become more approving of politicians and political institutions, more isolationist in foreign policy, more accepting of governmental intervention in the economy, more desiring of a larger and more powerful federal government, and more conservative on social policy issues than they might appear if citizens were better acquainted with the realm of public affairs. These findings suggest that collective preferences often misrepresent the range of voices and interests in society, because the mix of voices giving opinions and the preferences expressed by many opinion givers might change if everyone had equally high levels of political knowledge.

Gaps between surveyed and fully informed opinion seem to be influenced less by depletion problems affecting the demographics of opinion givers than by convergence behavior among less knowledgeable respondents. Information effects in survey questions with relatively high levels of DK/NO responses are about the same size as those found in questions with low levels of DK/NO responses, but they tend to grow faster over time than those in questions with lower levels of group depletion.
However, the unique impact of group depletion is hard to pin down because it tends to occur in questions with higher levels of cognitive difficulty. Group depletion should increase the size of information effects, but questions with higher levels of cognitive difficulty produce noisy opinions among both ill- and well-informed respondents, which tend to diminish the size of information effects. Demographic misrepresentation in the ranks of opinion givers therefore may only appear to contribute minimally to the size of information effects. The impact of convergence behavior is more easily seen: the greater the differences in the distribution of well- and ill-informed opinion, the larger the size of the information effect. In part, this is because the mix of opinions held by the most knowledgeable respondents often approximates the shape of the fully informed collective opinion: the more that ill-informed opinion pulls the marginal percentages away from the shape of well-informed opinion, the less marginal percentages come to resemble fully informed collective preferences. Another reason for this tendency comes from the finding that large differences between ill- and well-informed opinion often result when the opinions of less knowledgeable respondents are more lopsided as a group than those of knowledgeable respondents. Information effects tend to be larger when the opinions of well-informed respondents distribute evenly across response options, because this allows the shape of ill-informed opinion to determine the collective preference.

Informational effects arise from a variety of individual-level factors associated with or moderated by general political knowledge. The social distribution of policy-specific knowledge, differences in attitude structures and information processing strategies common to well- and ill-informed persons, levels of issue salience, and response instability produced by ambivalent attitudes all influence the size of information effects. In contrast, features of questionnaire design known to reduce the quality of responses were found to have little impact on the gaps between surveyed and fully informed opinion. Since it would be odd for the quality of collective preferences to be largely unrelated to the quality of questions posed to survey respondents, this finding suggests that question wording and ordering problems either produce essentially random errors in individual opinions, or that such problems produce systematic errors which influence ill- and well-informed opinion givers in similar ways. Some evidence was found to support the latter conclusion, confirming that the presence or absence of information effects is only one facet of representational quality in collective preferences.

Gaps between surveyed and fully informed opinions are also influenced by social processes of information diffusion and the information environments in which a population forms and updates its preferences. As a consequence, information effects can develop in unpredictable ways. For example, information effects tended to remain stable or grow in size over a period when the American population’s average level of political knowledge was growing. Yet, they tended to diminish in size when popular interest in politics was piqued by presidential elections, and when news media raised the prominence of an issue on the public’s agenda. In general, when the differences between simulated fully informed opinions are small, future levels of surveyed opinion tend to remain stable. But when large gaps emerged between these measures, simulated opinions were decidedly inaccurate in predicting the direction or magnitude of future changes in surveyed opinion.

In light of these findings, it is hard to escape the conclusion that opinion surveys are frequently misused in democratic politics. The indiscriminate use of polls to represent what the public wants or is willing to accept is ill-advised, since some survey results better represent fully informed preferences than others, and even fully informed preferences are unlikely to be enlightened. Yet it is also misleading to think of opinion surveys as providing nothing but information about the people. Surveys can become a channel for political representation when leaders use opinion polls as descriptions of what the people think and feel. Because polls provide information that is both prescriptive and descriptive, the use of collective preferences in democratic politics should be guided by the quality of representation they provide. The degree of congruence between surveyed opinion and fully informed opinion provides one gauge of representational quality, but this standard is more useful for identifying representation problems than for suggesting when a collective preference might resemble something like the active voice of the people.

Taken together, these findings suggest the need for survey researchers, journalists, politicians, and citizens to identify and properly interpret survey results that have been influenced by the social distribution of political knowledge. In the following section, I suggest some ways to draw attention to representation problems in survey data. Although it might also be possible to improve the representational quality of collective preferences by retooling the methods of survey research, focusing on improvements to survey methods may highlight the wrong problems. To the extent that social inequalities in the kind and quantity of political information
available to citizens are an enduring feature of democratic societies, then a solution to this problem is less likely to be found in reforming the standard practices of survey research than in reconsidering the uses of opinion surveys in democratic politics.

ADDRESSING ISSUES OF QUALITY IN OPINION SURVEYS

Many recommendations for improving the quality of surveyed opinion begin with the premise that the public’s ignorance of politics is the problem. From this perspective, appropriate remedies to public inattentiveness include improving the quality of news coverage and political debates (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Graber 1994, 2001; Rahn, Aldrich, and Borgida 1994), involving citizens in face-to-face deliberative processes (Fishkin 1991, 1995; Gastil 2000; Gastil and Dillard 1999), as well as increasing mobilization efforts, improving access to information, and providing more opportunities for civic education (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). All of these suggestions share the goal of making ordinary people better informed about politics, but they also share a common problem: the success of each of these solutions ultimately depends on changing the incentives that journalists, politicians, and ordinary citizens have in maintaining the present state of affairs. This laudable goal is certainly worth pursuing, but, like any solution to a collective action problem, is difficult to put into practice (Somin 1998; Weissberg 2001). We forget that the golden age of Athenian democracy, long heralded as a paragon of civic involvement (Arendt 1958), also had its share of popular disengagement from politics (Hansen 1991: Chapter 6; Splichal 1997: 28—9). After public shaming failed to raise turnout levels at the Assembly of the People — malingerers were fined and had their clothing daubed with red paint — the Greeks soon discovered that sizeable cash payments proved the most reliable means of guaranteeing enough attendance for a quorum. It is telling that the Pnyx—the meeting place of the Assembly — could, at best, accommodate only about a fifth of eligible citizens at one time (Hansen 1991: 130—2). Even Athenian expectations for popular involvement were never so high as to presume the typical citizen would show up to hear speeches and cast a vote.

Besides focusing attention on solutions that are difficult to achieve, the current debate over the significance of the public’s low levels of knowledge tends to regress into sweeping generalizations about the quality of surveyed opinion. If only the public were better informed, a common lament goes, we could have more confidence that opinion surveys communicate something worth listening to. Recent efforts to challenge this view, bearing titles like The Rational Public (Page and Shapiro 1992) and The Reasoning Voter (Popkin 1991), have succeeded mainly by arguing that political knowledge should be relatively unimportant to the quality of collective opinion and election outcomes. These revisionist views give the impression that the public is able to compensate effectively for its low levels of knowledge. As I have argued at length, this optimism is frequently misplaced.

I am suggesting that the public’s disengagement from political life should not be the defining problem in this debate. It is merely a fact. The fundamental problem lies in the ways that journalists, politicians, activists, and scholars interpret survey results in light of or in spite of this fact. Palls fall short of the “active voice” standard, but they are more influential than the “information only” perspective suggests. Neither view reflects adequately the role of opinion surveys in democratic societies; neither grasps the essential fact that sometimes political knowledge matters, and sometimes it does not.

Instead of focusing on the public’s lack of knowledge, producers and consumers of survey data would do well to determine when this lack of knowledge has a bearing on collective preferences. Toward this end I propose two ways to begin addressing issues of quality in collective preferences. Neither requires much additional effort or expenditure of resources on the part of survey organizations or those who report survey data. And because these recommendations are directed at pollsters, consultants, and journalists who interpret survey data for news media and political leaders, they avoid some of the collective action problems that plague well-intentioned remedies to the public’s distaste for political information. However, these suggestions apply cosmetic fixes to a problem that invites a more foundational response. Later sections of this chapter will consider the larger and more difficult question of how opinion surveys might better enhance the quality of popular representation in democratic politics.

Include Knowledge Questions in Opinion Surveys as a Means to Estimate Quality in Collective Preferences

Despite the exuberance of George Gallup and other pioneers of the sample survey, opinion researchers and their critics have long cautioned against
casually treating marginal percentages from this or that survey question as valid measures of what the people really want. One recurring concern since the beginning of the polling enterprise has been that the numerically precise measures of public opinion elicited by surveys can impart the patina of thoughtful consideration to what are essentially "doorstep opinions." One early critic of polling (Bernays 1945) cautioned that interpreting marginal percentages without also examining the extent to which respondents are knowledgeable about the subject of the question is "like diagnosing a patient by only reading the thermometer" (267a). Despite long-standing concerns over what Philip Converse later termed the "nonattitude" problem, most opinion surveys still contain few if any measures designed to tap knowledge of the issues placed before survey respondents.

Estimating information effects in collective preferences requires some measure of political knowledge. An emerging consensus suggests that since most people seem to be generalists when it comes to political knowledge, knowledge of specific issues can be predicted with some accuracy from a person's score on a test of general political knowledge consisting of only a few questions. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1993) have shown that a simple five-item index performs quite well next to longer scales. Nonetheless, it is also clear that general tests of political knowledge have their limitations. Some questions are more difficult than others, and the selection of items included in a knowledge scale thus has an important bearing on a population's apparent competence (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). The attempt to determine which facts are relevant to a given set of opinions is invariably political, and it may be difficult to ascertain which of the relevant facts are more important than others (Kuklinski, Quirk et al. 1998). Encouraging respondents to give "don't know" responses can make them seem less knowledgeable about politics than they actually are (Mondak 2000, 2001; Mondak and Davis 2001). Moreover, there is some evidence of heterogeneity in knowledge of specific issues (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Iyengar 1986, 1990; Krosnick 1998; see also Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996), and policy-specific information can have a substantial impact on policy preferences that is independent from the effect of general political knowledge (Gilens 2001).

While such considerations invite further attention from researchers, direct measures of political knowledge nonetheless have several advantages over filter questions and other methods developed by survey practitioners to isolate relatively knowledgeable groups of respondents who hold firm opinions. A major drawback of using filter questions and "don't know" inducements is that they cause some respondents to be treated as missing. Aside from the depletion problems that these methods produce, the missing responses that might otherwise be recorded can be quite revealing. The use of filter questions thus eliminates a potentially important (and more descriptively representative) counterfactual measure of opinion.

Knowledge scales not only provide a way to distinguish between well- and ill-informed responses while creating fewer missing observations, but they also provide a useful measure of the volatility of collective preferences. One measure of volatility that has received attention in recent years is the "mushiness index" developed by Yankelovich, Skelly, and White (Ascher 1988: 34–5; Yankelovich 1991: 34–7). This index consists of several follow-up responses to a question asking respondents to state their views on an issue. These follow-up questions tap the salience of the issue to respondents, the likelihood that respondents will change their views on the issue, how much respondents talk about the issue with other people, and how knowledgeable they feel about the issue. Although the mushiness index was found to perform quite well, it apparently never has been used since its development (Yankelovich 1991: 36). This is likely due to two problems. First, the mushiness index is simply too resource-intensive: asking four follow-up questions for every substantive question means that a survey can cover only one-fifth the number of issues it might otherwise explore. Second, although opinion mushiness can be indicated with something as simple as marking marginal percentages with an asterisk, the concept of opinion volatility is exceedingly difficult to communicate to lay audiences. Using knowledge measures to assess the quality of survey results has an edge in both of these areas. Including a few questions tapping knowledge of specific issues or an omnibus knowledge scale, which can be included at the end of a survey, is much less resource intensive than the mushiness index. Likewise, few journalists, political leaders, or lay audiences would have difficulty understanding a sentence like "Although the public as a whole is strongly opposed to raising taxes, a slight majority of the most knowledgeable citizens say they're willing to pay more to reduce the deficit."

The primary advantage of political knowledge questions over filters or other measures is the flexibility such questions allow for estimating various aspects of quality in a collective opinion. A single knowledge scale can be used to reveal dispersion effects brought about by differences in knowledge levels, estimate multiple shades of informed opinion by contrasting the group preferences of various information quartiles, and assess how well the mix of opinions given by the most knowledgeable
respondents represents a hypothetical fully informed collective preference. One need not conduct a full-fledged simulation in order to estimate the effects of information asymmetries. A reasonable estimate can be obtained by simply comparing the differences of opinion between the most- and least-knowledgeable respondents. If the differences appear substantial, then the collective preference is likely to be influenced by information effects. When respondents at all levels of knowledge give roughly similar opinions, the collective preference is unlikely to be affected by information asymmetries. Because the influence of information effects can be seen by looking at a simple crosstabular display of opinions by knowledge level, measures of factual knowledge make it possible for consumers and producers of survey data to estimate when collective preferences might be influenced by such effects without resorting to the rather involved simulation procedure used here.  

Our confidence or dismay in the ability of citizens to comprehend political issues must be supported by evidence rather than intuition. To presume that a population either lacks or possesses a rudimentary understanding of public issues, or to hope that summing individual responses will reveal a population’s considered opinion, is to misunderstand the nature of collective preferences. At a minimum, a short index or scale of political knowledge should be included in the standard set of demographics questions attached to any political opinion survey. Better still, pollsters might consider following opinion questions with policy-specific knowledge questions to clarify the factual basis from which opinions are offered. We want to know whether respondents understood what the questioners intended to ask them, and how well they were acquainted with the topic under investigation. As Leo Bogart observed, "The question of what people think about public issues is really secondary to the question of whether they think about them at all" (1967: 337, emphasis in original). Obviously, the scope and construction of such knowledge measures will be influenced by the purposes for which a survey is to be used. But without a direct measure of political knowledge, there is no reliable way to identify the presence and likely impact of information asymmetries in measures of surveyed opinion.

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Two widely available substitutes for direct measures of political knowledge - education and income level — give only the roughest approximations of information levels. Part of the reason is that the effects of education and income are likely to be confounded with other demographic characteristics and particular socialization experiences. Separating the effects of these various influences requires a direct measure of political knowledge.

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Report Collective Preferences in Ways that Draw Attention to Issues of Quality and Representation

One of the fundamental problems with using opinion surveys in democratic politics is that they may seem to be one thing when they are not. Majority opinions may seem to be prescriptive measures of what the people want or will abide, when on closer inspection they seem more like artifacts of widespread confusion over the issues. The opposite is also true: majority preferences on new or obscure political issues may be summarily dismissed as ill-founded or shallow, when a more detailed analysis would show that people with high and low levels of relevant knowledge hold essentially the same opinions. One reason for this problem is careless reporting of survey results, especially the popular tendency to emphasize marginal percentages without discussing the underlying distributions of subgroup opinion. Another is the absence of a language with which consumers and producers of survey data can discuss issues of quality in collective preferences (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Price and Neijens 1997; Yankelovich 1991). Lacking such a language, users of survey data often fall into the habit of deferring to the judgment of experts, relying on their own intuition, or following prior expectations (from "you can't trust the polls" to "surveys tell it like it is") when evaluating the potential quality of poll results.

The methods outlined in this book for estimating fully informed opinion provide a way to identify some of the more obvious representation problems in collective opinions. It is often appropriate to describe the representational quality of survey results by contrasting the opinions of knowledgeable people with the opinions of less knowledgeable respondents or the collective preference of the entire group of opinion givers. To suggest that a collective opinion is free of obvious representational problems, it might be enough to say "Opinion polls show that people from all walks of life prefer term limits for members of Congress, and it seems to make little difference whether people are familiar with the issue or have heard hardly anything about it." Likewise, to raise the possibility that a measure of opinion is influenced by information effects, one need only say "Even though the public as a whole prefers that the government take a stronger stance in regulating the economy, support for free markets is higher among people who are more informed about national politics." Journalists occasionally describe opinion data in this way, and such reporting should be encouraged as a way to address issues of quality in language that lay persons can understand.
Another way of addressing the quality of survey results is to describe the knowledge levels of opinion givers, preferably by mentioning the percentage of opinion givers that know something about an issue or care about an issue a great deal. Yet while similar ideas have been suggested in recent years (e.g., Cantril 1991; Crespi 1989; Yankelovich 1991), it is still unusual to see journalists focus on these aspects of quality in survey data. Political consultants and survey researchers seem to be more attuned to such nuances, however, and the private survey information available to political leaders may be much more detailed in this regard than is the case for publicly-available data.

One traditional gray area in the reporting of opinion data involves what Pierre Bourdieu (1990: 172) calls the "trauma, cross, and misery" of polling organizations: What to do with the respondents who give "don't know" or "no opinion" responses? In light of the representation problems imparted by uneven rates of item nonresponse, it seems inappropriate to omit the percentages of DK/NOS responses when reporting survey results. Treating substantive responses from filtered questions as though they represented the entirety of a population's opinions is misleading because it obscures the potential for misrepresentation of voices. The general rule of thumb suggested by this study is that marginal percentages should be reported in terms of the entire sample of respondents rather than the pool of opinion givers. While it is interesting to know that two-thirds of opinion givers favor a particular policy, it is much more important to know that only half of respondents give substantive answers to the question.

Reporting survey results in ways that draw attention to indicators of quality helps to clarify the meaning of marginal percentages. Not only does discussion of quality issues properly focus attention on the potential usefulness of collective preferences, but it also draws attention to otherwise hidden dimensions of opinion data. For example, knowing that the most informed respondents tend to favor a policy that is opposed by the least informed suggests that relative levels of DK/NOS responses may have important consequences for the shape of opinion marginals. Bringing issues of quality into discussions of survey results can help dispel the impression that the public has decisive opinions on a range of issues at the same time as it highlights instances where the public's opinions are deeply rooted and, perhaps, worth attending.

**THE TWO MEANINGS OF PUBLIC OPINION**

If, as this book has argued, collective rationality cannot be counted upon to deliver the mass public from various alleged deficiencies in its individual opinions, it might appear that the best systems of democratic rule should be those that minimize a polity's reliance on citizen input aside from the corrective hand of the occasional election (Somin 1998; Weissberg 2002a). The problem with this Schumpeterian conclusion lies in the premise that equates public opinion with the results of opinion surveys and, more broadly, that defines public opinion in utilitarian terms as the aggregation of individual preferences. Appreciating the limitations of this premise requires us to reconnect our contemporary understanding of public opinion to the meanings it carried before the age of the sample survey. The purpose of this exercise is not to separate the concept of public opinion from its present associations, but rather to enlarge and reinvigorate the term with a fuller sense of its foundational standing in democratic theory. Doing so opens a door of escape from the uncomfortable (and, I believe, false) conclusion that the usefulness of collective preferences to democratic processes depends on some version of collective rationality to imbue public opinion with more meaning than may be found in the opinions of individuals.

Largely due to the successes of survey research as a tool for social inquiry, popular use of the label "public opinion" has evolved since the advent of the sample survey nearly 70 years ago to denote aggregations of preferences relevant to public affairs that are expressed to survey interviewers in private by isolated individuals (P. E. Converse 1987; Ginsberg 1986; Glasser and Salmon 1995; Herbst 1993; Lee 2002; Sanders 1999). Yet the thoroughness of this transformation belies the fact that this is, in the long scheme of things, still a fairly new way of thinking about public opinion. When Frankfurt School sociologist Friedrich Pollock (1976: 230) questions whether public opinion is "a phenomenon of quantities," suggesting instead that it is a phenomenon of social forces, he invokes a conception of public opinion that predates the sample survey and that resonates deeply in the traditions of political philosophy. At the risk of

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2 While many political pollsters have long conducted multivariate analyses using the latest statistical methods to plumb their data (Bruce and Wilcox 2000; Jacobs and Shapiro 1995), this is not always the case. For example, memos on public opinion given to President Clinton by advisor Dick Morris rarely went beyond simple marginal frequencies (Morris 1999), and pollster Frank Luntz convinced the Republican leadership in the U.S. House of Representatives that the 10 policy items comprising its "Contract with America" had overwhelming public support, revealing only later that his recommendations had been made on the basis of just a few focus group interviews (see note 8 in Chapter 7).
greatly oversimplifying the genealogy of public opinion as a concept, we can mark its development through three broad stages: from the earliest philosophical treatments of public opinion as an abstract force in society, developed in the writings of Locke, Bentham, Hume, Hegel, Madison, and Rousseau, but which can be traced back to ancient Roman and Greek political thought; to the mid 19th- and early 20th-century conceptions of public opinion as a sociological or discursive phenomenon, revealed ideally through active deliberation and arising from the competition among groups for social, economic, or political power, exemplified in the writings of Bryce, Tarde, Blumer, and Rogers, but carried on in the work of Bourdieu, Pateman, Barber, Fraser, and Habermas, among others; to the late 20th century vision of public opinion as a psychological phenomenon observed in the aggregation of individual preferences within a population or sample.

Two distinctions between past and current definitions of public opinion are especially relevant for the present discussion. First, up until the 1930s, the phenomenon of public opinion tended to be associated with action (including the expression of political opinions in public settings) or barriers to action rather than merely with a predisposition or readiness to act. In contrast, psychological interpretations of public opinion informed by survey research have tended to view attitudes rather than actions as the primary phenomenon of interest (Blankenship 1948). Second, while the earlier sociological conceptions of public opinion were concerned with action conducted by or in the service of interested groups rather than the population as a whole, the method of random sampling has cultivated a perspective which views public opinion as an attribute of unorganized masses or entire societies. Thus while theorists in the century before the survey era tended to see public opinion as a form of social communication or control expressed through action that moderates or enhances the political power of organized groups, contemporary perspectives tend to see public opinion as a psychological construct expressed through words that predicts the likely behavior of unorganized groups (i.e., different types of individuals) and provides information about the political preferences of entire populations.

The limitations in this new way of thinking about public opinion are today more apparent than they were at first. Social scientists have long discarded the political agenda of early survey researchers who saw polls as an important tool for democratic reform (J. M. Converse 1987). In part this change occurred as survey researchers became more familiar with the methodological limitations of polling and the characteristics of survey responses, which often did little to inspire confidence in the wisdom of the masses. Instead, surveys are today seen among social scientists primarily as an information-gathering tool, more useful for making sense of the public’s attitudes and behaviors than for defining the public’s priorities or giving authentic voice to its concerns (for exceptions, see Bennett 1990; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Kay 1998). Indeed, while academic parlance typically reserves the term public opinion for describing the surveyed attitudes or values of individuals, the classic (if abstract) understanding of public opinion as the power of popular sovereignty is still understood today, as it was to the contemporaries of Tocqueville and Bryce, as something which emerges from the currents of group politics. The disjunction between these two meanings of public opinion is captured succinctly by Leo Bogart (1967):

A 1964 NORC survey reported by Charles Y. Glock and Rodney Stark found that 7 per cent of U.S. adults agreed that Hitler was right to try to kill all the Jews. We attribute no particular importance to this 7 per cent, which projects to some 8 million individuals, each one a potential mass murderer, because the sentiments they express to an interviewer are made individually without awareness of their collective strength. By contrast, we may feel enormous concern about the similarly small percentage of people who now vote for the neo-Nazi party in Germany, precisely because their opinions are crystallized and their political force is known.

Although early survey researchers eventually were successful in appropriating the label of public opinion to describe the results of sample surveys, the functional forms of public opinion have remained essentially unchanged. We still tend to recognize the political manifestation of public opinion — by which we typically mean persuasive or coercive pressure brought against the state by actors who are not part of state institutions - in the mobilizing activities of political parties, the abiding
power of pressure groups as intermediaries acting on behalf of particular interests, and the potential for agitation by social movements to bring about desired change from unresponsive institutions. What has changed since the rise of opinion polling is that we no longer tend to think of these activities as expressions of public opinion.

This double-mindedness is an important reason why contemporary students of politics have found it difficult to attribute much political legitimacy or usefulness to opinion polls, for it is clear by any measure that the organized activities of groups directed against key political decision makers carry far more power in the democratic process than do the private views of citizens unacquainted with one another, let alone organized for action or even caring much to inquire what all the ruckus is about. In this light, the hesitation among social scientists to seriously consider the results of opinion surveys as revealing something like the “will of the people” can be interpreted as arising from a healthy respect for the established channels of accountability and power in contemporary liberal democracies, rather than merely from an abiding distrust of the survey method for giving expression to the people’s voice. To the extent that opinion polls seem to have little formal or substantive impact on the political process, then by equating the term public opinion with survey results we must conclude that public opinion so understood has little to do with popular sovereignty, the exercise of which we typically ascribe to groups and elections.

This conceptual tension provided the basis of a critique of the polling enterprise most forcefully advanced in the writings of Herbert Blumer (1948), Lindsay Rogers (1949), and Pierre Bourdieu (1979), who each attempted to wrest the label of public opinion from the product of survey research. The most thoroughgoing of these critiques was leveled by sociologist Herbert Blumer. Central to Blumer’s (1948) criticism of the polling enterprise was the notion that the "sampling procedure forces a treatment of society as if society were only an aggregation of disparate individuals" (546). The core problem, in his view, is that "We do not know at all whether individuals in the sample represent that portion of structured society that is participating in the formation of public opinion on a given issue" (546), and "we know essentially nothing of the individual in the sample with reference to the significance of him or of his opinion in the public opinion that is being built up or which is expressing itself functionally in the operation of society" (546). In short, the position staked out by Blumer faults pollsters for the inability of the polling method to capture the way that public opinion actually works in society.

"If public opinion is to be studied in any realistic sense," Blumer wrote, "its depiction must be faithful to its empirical character" (543). From this perspective, according to Blumer, "in any realistic sense public opinion consists of the pattern of the diverse views and positions on the issue that come to the individuals who have to act in response to the public opinion" (545, italics in original).

More than 50 years have passed since the publication of Blumer’s famous attack on opinion polling, and it speaks well for the shelf-life of an idea that the debate sparked by his critique remains heated to this day. Yet despite the energy devoted to this debate, the continuing controversy over whether public opinion is best defined as the aggregation of individual preferences or as the "effective" expression of group-based opinion seems to have been largely emptied of its constructive potential. The most recent contributions to this debate are in many ways most remarkable for the starkness of their assertions and lack of engagement with the other side. For instance, the opening words of the 50th anniversary special issue of Public Opinion Quarterly was Eleanor Singer’s (1987) celebratory proclamation that "Blumer was wrong," followed several years later by an equally blunt retort that "Blumer was right" (Salmon and Glasser 1995). More than a debate, these exchanges have all the salient qualities of a divorce proceedings: two camps unable or unwilling to work through what appear to be irreconcilable theoretical differences.

The debate is also remarkable for its one-sidedness. Despite the frequency with which Blumer’s challenge is revisited by those critical of the modern polling enterprise, to my knowledge only one defender of the method has stepped forward in recent years to mount extended rebuttals in scholarly journals (P. E. Converse 1987; Converse 1996; see also Verba 1996). Writing in defense of survey research, Philip Converse (1987) pointed out that opinion polls had, since the days of Blumer’s critique, become more closely and routinely perceived as public opinion by political actors, journalists, and the general public. While this argument in some ways misses Blumer’s larger point, that talking about polls as public opinion doesn’t mean that polls capture the actual processes of political influence at work between citizens and their representatives, Converse is surely correct that the ubiquity of opinion polling has conditioned people...

to view polls as expressions of public opinion (Ginsberg 1986; Herbst 1993). This tendency, in Converse’s view, appears to vindicate the polling enterprise in light of Blumer’s critique:

If ...any deflection whatever of behavior by the representative which arises as a result of some exposure to poll data, even the most vague “taking account of it,” classifies as an instance of actual influence, then of course public opinion in poll form must be said to have a great deal of influence. And this kind of minimal influence must occur in very large doses among political practitioners, or it would be extremely hard to explain why such users pay many millions of dollars a year for this expensive class of information. (1987. S22)

In other words, Converse takes Blumer largely on his own terms but argues that the world has changed in 40 years. Moreover, Converse recognizes with Blumer that “public opinion as measured by sample surveys and public opinion ‘effective’ in the political arena, while often reasonably convergent, are hardly the same thing and can at times diverge remarkably” (S20). Converse adds, “What one makes of the discrepancy in normative terms, of course, cannot be solved empirically” (S21).

This last point illustrates what I believe is the major problem with the terms on which this debate over the identity of public opinion is being contested: at one level the participants are disagreeing over the definition of what constitutes public opinion as well as the empirical claim that polls have a palpable influence on politics, but at a deeper level the more fundamental disagreement can be seen as one over the political influence that polls ought to have relative to groups. A normative reading of this debate suggests that this deeper disagreement shows itself from time to time but never assumes a place of central importance in the arguments of either side. 6

5 For example, the essence of Converse’s own contribution to the larger normative questions in this debate seems to be captured in the following sentence: “In the degree that values propel us to take a sober account of the opinion of all the people in forming policy outcomes – and they surely propel most of us a good distance in this direction – we might as well get a reasonably accurate reading of that opinion rather than entrusting it to a few local experts to guess at it” (S24, italics mine). This is hardly a rousing defense of the polling enterprise. Yet even this tentative justification begs the very question that I argue lies at the heart of this debate: Why might we want to “take a sober account of the opinion of all the people” in the first place?

Blumer addresses this question more directly, but his justification is nearly as perfunctory as that given by Converse. Blumer dismisses as a “normative plea” the idea that opinion polls yield a better picture of public opinion than “the confused, indefinite, slanted, and favor-ridden expressions of opinion that come ordinarily to the legislator, administrator or executive who has to act on public opinion” (S548). In a now famous passage, Blumer concludes that “It is sufficient to note that if one seeks to justify polling as a method of studying public opinion on the ground that the composition of public opinion ought to be different than what it is, he is not establishing the validity of the method for the study of the empirical world as it is. Instead, he is hanging on the coat-tails of a dubious proposal for social reform” (S548).

7 Although this general perspective resonated with social scientists of an earlier generation (e.g., Blumer 1946; Davison 1958; Key 1961; Lazarsfeld 1957; for a review, see Price 1992), it has fallen into disuse today (for exceptions, see Lee 2002; Shamir and Shamir 2000), and the public opinion literature has been impoverished by its neglect. Among the likely factors contributing to this shift are the rise of the mass society paradigm for understanding public opinion processes, the waning influence of sociological theory and waxing importance of psychological theory in orienting contemporary public opinion research, the ascendancy of the sample survey as a dominant tool of social inquiry, and the increased specialization of knowledge that has accompanied the development and expansion of social science disciplines over the last 50 years.

It is precisely this neglected normative dimension that holds the promise of reconnecting these two ways of thinking about public opinion, for the debate over its meaning and definition obscures a fundamental normative tension between these two important conceptions of public opinion. The tension lies in the apparent tradeoff between representation of interests and representation of voices revealed in this study: the closer an indicator of collective opinion comes to representing all voices in a public, the less likely it will be to reflect the interests of that public. Put another way, the more descriptively representative the indicator of public opinion (surveys being the prime example of a descriptively representative indicator), the more likely the opinion it communicates will be ill-informed, unreflective, and otherwise wanting in quality, when quality is defined in terms of collective interest representation.

Resolving this tension requires a turn away from the recent tendency to identify public opinion with a particular method or channel of influence. Instead, we might do better to envision public opinion as a system of social indicators in which collective preferences and collective decisions, along with various types of individual and group activity, are seen as potentially offering different qualities or kinds of representation? If polls are unlikely...
to disappear from the political landscape, and if polls are a channel for political representation — however informal this representation may be — then critics and defenders of the polling method would do well to focus on the kinds of representation that polls might best provide relative to other indicators of public opinion. Instead of asking what public opinion is, this approach would ask which indicators of public opinion should have political power in democratic societies, and which specific powers or roles each kind of public opinion should have. With particular regard to collective preferences revealed in opinion surveys, this approach could attempt to address two questions: What sort of opinion might surveys be particularly good at revealing, and which political functions might surveys be particularly suited to fulfill?

RECONSIDERING THE USES OF OPINION SURVEYS IN DEMOCRATIC POLITICS

How then to move the discussion forward to address the underlying normative issues at the heart of both the Blumer/Converse debate and the difficulty that many have in conceiving of opinion surveys as a potentially valuable form of democratic communication? Let me suggest four propositions that, taken together, can provide a basis for bracketing the important but seemingly intractable theoretical differences that have contributed to the entrenchment of current thinking on these matters:

1. Opinion polling is here to stay.
2. The presence of opinion polling is unlikely to diminish substantially the political power of group activity in democratic political systems.
3. Organized groups provide a channel for political representation.
4. Opinion surveys provide a channel for political representation.

These four propositions taken together help to refocus attention on some key but underappreciated issues. First, if both groups and opinion surveys are likely to have a political impact in democratic societies, then the search for an umbrella definition of public opinion based on groups or polls is unlikely to be of much help in the attempt to understand the actual impact of groups, polls, and other channels of public opinion on political, economic, and civic institutions. Moreover, given that political polls are now commonplace and unlikely to decline in importance in the foreseeable future, the argument that poll results are something other than public opinion obscures the empirical reality that polls are often seen by journalists and political actors as indicators of public opinion (although this is not always the case; see Herbst 1998; Jacobs, Lawrence et al. 1998). This is not to say that the debate over definitions is trivial, just that it is limited in its potential for constructive contributions to pressing questions about the appropriate uses of opinion polls and other indicators of public opinion in the process of governance.

Second, if opinion polling is a channel for representation and if the survey enterprise is unlikely to eclipse the power of organized groups, then instead of trying to define public opinion in terms of either polls or groups we might do better to think of polls and groups as playing different roles within a larger system of socially constructed public opinion indicators. To the extent that groups and opinion surveys are indeed channels for political representation, a systems perspective encourages us to attend not only to the kinds of power currently attributed to or exercised by various opinion indicators but also to the sorts of power these indicators ought to have given the strengths and limitations that each possesses as a vehicle for political representation and channel for political communication.

In short, this perspective helps to focus attention on the quality and type of representation afforded by each indicator, rather than whether one is generally better, more accurate, or more legitimate than the other. As Vincent Price (1992) observes, "To say that the ascendancy of polling helped to establish aggregate conceptions of public opinion is to say nothing about the inherent suitability of survey techniques as a mode of observation, only something about the typical way of interpreting such observations" (35). It is precisely in drawing attention to "the inherent suitability of survey techniques as a mode of observation" that normative theory can contribute to the polling enterprise. By recasting the Blumer/Converse enterprise (Converse 1996).

9 The use of "socially constructed" should here be understood in the most narrow sense as recognizing that different phenomena come to be associated with the concept "public opinion" at different times by different people, rather than as a statement about whether public opinion exists "out there" independently of polls or other means of assessing it.
debate as a representation issue rather than a disagreement about the validity of opinion polling, the key question then becomes how much legitimacy polls and groups should be accorded for particular types of representation.

Descriptive Representation versus Interest Representation

To the extent that the development of fully informed or enlightened political preferences requires even a modest amount of relevant factual information, it would seem as a general rule that we should not expect measures of opinion that maximize descriptive representation to reveal the interests of an ill-informed population. Of course, any population should contain individuals who are knowledgeable about particular issues. The problem is that this sort of knowledge tends to be concentrated among groups already advantaged in the political system. Since these well-informed groups can be expected to have interests at least occasionally at odds with those of their ill-informed counterparts, it seems unlikely that any method for isolating only those people with informed preferences should produce measures of opinion that are descriptively representative of a population as a whole.

Thus, a core tension with the use of opinion surveys as an input to the political process is that descriptive representation and interest representation are unlikely to obtain at the same time in the same measure. In general, collective preferences should tend either to misrepresent the demographic makeup of a population, or to misrepresent a population's fully informed needs, wants, and values. Moreover, the more egalitarian the indicator of public opinion — with opinion surveys in general being relatively more egalitarian than other indicators - the less likely the indicator will be effective, in Blumer's sense of having power in the political process. Outside of the election context, where the distribution of individual votes is formally recognized as decisive and authoritative, collective preferences are channels of representation that must themselves be represented by agents who convey and interpret measures of aggregate opinion to audiences or decision makers.

Despite these limitations, even the most hardened detractors of the polling method probably suspect that the kind of representation afforded by surveys must be good for something. Blumer himself suggested as much in a footnote to his famous 1948 critique, where he entertained the idea that "At the best, . . . a [polling] `referendum' could operate as a corrective supplement and not as a substitute [for organized group activity]" (548).

But given current thinking among political philosophers about the nature of political interests, the "something" that polls might be good for is unlikely to be interest representation, at least when defining interests in terms of preferences for one policy or another. There is good reason to expect that preferences articulated by mobilized groups will reflect underlying interests more completely than those expressed in opinion surveys of mass publics (Weissberg 2001, 2002a), in large part because group opinions undergo a filtering process brought about by preparing for and engaging in public deliberation with other groups (Mansbridge 1992). From this perspective, even defenders of the polling method might agree with Blumer that the quality of preferences represented by organized groups makes them deserving of special attention in the political system. The fact that opinion polls seem typically to be ignored in the policymaking process (Crespi 1989; Herbst 1998; Jacobs, Lawrence et al. 1998; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Rich 1981) may often be an appropriate response by decision makers seeking to legislate in the public's interest.

Yet, as is widely known, the primary defect of interest group pluralism is that all relevant interests are unlikely to be represented properly in the group process. In the famous words of political scientist E. E. Schattschneider, "The flaw in the pluralist heaven is that the heavenly chorus sings with a strong upper-class accent" (Schattschneider 1960: 34-5). Given this fault with interest group pluralism, it seems desirable that indicators of public opinion that privilege interest representation should somehow be supplemented by indicators of public opinion that emphasize descriptive representation. But the solution does not seem to be elevating the standing of polls relative to groups as indicators of interest, or supposing that polls and groups can function interchangeably as indicators of public opinion, differing primarily in the accuracy of their claims (Gallup and Rae 1940). As Russell Neuman (1986) suggests, "There is a dynamic balance between the special talents of the political elite and the political system which generates the elite. It remains important to balance the specialized knowledge of the elite and the generalized common sense of the mass polity" (189). What then might usefully be represented by surveys in a balanced system of public opinion indicators?

10 For a review of studies documenting biases in the interest group system, see Baumgartner and Leech 1998. One reason for bias in the group system is the uneven social distribution of skills and resources necessary for effectively leveraging power in the pluralist system (Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Another reason is that some strata of society seem less aware of their interests than others, leaving those interests underrepresented among organized groups (Bachrach 1975).
By raising this question, I am not suggesting that surveys ought to be used as a channel of political representation. On the contrary, I suspect that surveys may not be well suited to the task of representing populations, and it is unclear to me how much the current limitations of the survey method as a representational vehicle can be improved upon. Rather, I am suggesting that surveys are already being used as a channel of representation, and that it may be nearly impossible to use survey data in the political process without engaging in some form of representational activity. If polls are already being used as a channel for political representation, and if polls are here to stay, then it seems appropriate to explore the most appropriate kinds of representation that polls could provide. It may be that the most appropriate kind of representation is merely the least damaging of all the inappropriate kinds of representation that polls could potentially afford. But even if the choice is among the better of undesirable outcomes, putting this question to the formidable intellectual talent on both sides of the Blumer/Converse debate seems likely to generate serious attention to the current and future uses of surveys in democratic politics. As a process of sustained deliberation is most likely to produce thoughtful answers to the question of what political functions surveys might be especially good for, the next section suggests some starting points for such a discussion.

WHAT CAN SURVEYS TELL US ABOUT PUBLIC OPINION?

To explore what sorts of opinions might usefully be represented by surveys in a balanced system of public opinion indicators, we might begin by reflecting on the sorts of opinions we should expect citizens to possess. Such reflection requires a normative theory of the citizen in a democratic society that specifies the political roles citizens play relative to other actors as well as the kinds of opinions necessary to fulfill those roles (Natchez 1985). Different theories of democracy will naturally emphasize different capacities of citizens (Beiner 1995; Held 1987; Thompson 1970), but a helpful point of departure for such an analysis is the five-stage model of democratic problem solving proposed by Vincent Price and Peter Neijens (1997). Their model, which identifies discrete periods during political deliberation when various actors might play different roles or contribute different kinds of information, provides a common framework for assessing the decision-making process that is easily adapted to different models of democracy. Price and Neijens suggest that collective decision making begins with an "elicitation of values" stage, in which a problem is defined along with the values and goals considered important in resolving the problem. Once the problem and relevant goals have been clarified, alternative solutions for addressing the problem are advanced and debated in the "development of options" stage, in which the number of possible options is reduced to a set of feasible alternatives. Once this winnowing process is completed, the pros, cons, and likely outcomes of each alternative are determined in the "estimation of consequences" stage. Having clarified the probable consequences of each alternative, the decision process advances to the "evaluation of alternatives" stage in which advocates for each proposal attempt to persuade others of its merits. Characterized by active public deliberation and heightened press coverage to the issue, this stage "is the phase that is most clearly identified as public discourse" (340) and is marked by widespread attention to the issue even among ordinary citizens. Public discussion over the merits of each proposed solution comes to a close at the fifth and final "decision" stage, when an individual, institutional, or collective decision selects one of the proposed solutions to remedy the problem.

Interest groups, politicians, news media, and other political actors are active within each of the five stages, and different models of democracy rely to various degrees on each actor to contribute in specific ways to the decision-making process. For example, liberal theories of democracy would tend to reserve a dominant role in the first three stages for experts, politicians, and interest groups. When it comes to the role of collective preferences in the larger decision-making process, Price and Neijens observe that opinion surveys were intended by their early proponents "to advance a particular aspect of quality – broad participation – at a particular phase of the decision-making process – the evaluation [of alternatives] stage" (352). Moreover, they note that with few exceptions, the potential for opinion polls to contribute to democratic decision making almost always has been understood to occur within the policy evaluation stage.

This was the role for surveys popularized by George Gallup (Gallup and Rae 1940), who adapted it from James Bryce (1891), and its impact is still seen today in the kinds of questions routinely put to the mass public by survey researchers, particularly in public interest polls (e.g., the Americans Talk Issues surveys) and media surveys. Questions like, "If it were a choice between these two items, which do you think President Clinton should do: cut the budget deficit or cut the taxes for the middle class?" (Harris), or "Do you think Congress should raise taxes to narrow the federal budget deficit even if George Bush does not ask for a tax increase, or not?"
exercise vigilance over every interest they may have. The institutions of the interests of many citizens will be at stake in any policy decision, but it is another thing to presume that democracy requires citizens to be offended by the public's apparent lack of civic-mindedness? Certainly and Keeter (1996). But what core tenet of democratic theory is being as a consequence, more aware of their political interests (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). But what core tenet of democratic theory is being offended by the public's apparent lack of civic-mindedness? Certainly the interests of many citizens will be at stake in any policy decision, but it is another thing to presume that democracy requires citizens to exercise vigilance over every interest they may have. The institutions of representative as opposed to direct democracy are designed precisely to avoid encumbering citizens with such an onerous responsibility. Rather, the cause for alarm seemed to be the (now apparently unrealistic) expectations of an informed citizenry developed in what is generally referred to as the "classical theory" of democracy. Lipmann (1922) disparaged the ideal of an "omnicompetent citizen" presumed by "those thinkers of the Eighteenth Century who designed the matrix of democracy" (162), Schumpeter ([1942] 1976) contrasted his realist view of democracy with an outmoded "eighteenth-century philosophy of democracy" 11 (250), and Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (Berelson 1952; Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954) confronted expectations from "the normative theory of political democracy" (Berelson 1952: 313) with the depressing results of opinion surveys. Yet, Carole Pateman's careful investigation of the works of Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment democratic theorists reveals that this "notion of a 'classical theory of democracy' is a myth" (Pateman 1970: 17). In contrast to popular rendering of this "classical" model, Pateman concludes that these earlier theorists were concerned with "the choice of good representatives (leaders) rather than the formulation of the electorate's opinion as such" (19) and with the "educative effect of participation" through which individuals developed the desirable attitudes and perspectives of the citizens. 12

Results from these three types of evaluation questions could potentially provide useful information about the climate of opinion in which the policy evaluation process takes place, but using them in a more prescriptive sense as a form of input to the policy-making process would seem to require that people giving answers have at least passing acquaintance with the objects being evaluated. This expectation quickly foundered when dashed against data by the first generation of survey researchers, a discovery that led Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954: 311) to observe that "If the democratic system depended solely on the qualifications of the individual voter, then it seems remarkable that democracies have survived through the centuries." Giovanni Sartori (1965) put it more bluntly: "Let us be honest. The average voter is called on to make decisions on questions about which he knows nothing. In other words, he is incompetent" (78).

Despite the stir that this revelation caused among social scientists at the time, less attention was given then or since to the reasons why this discovery should be a cause for such profound disappointment. It is clear that politics benefit when political knowledge is high and evenly distributed, and that many shortcomings and inefficiencies in political systems could be remedied if ordinary citizens were more attentive to public affairs and, as a consequence, more aware of their political interests (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). But what core tenet of democratic theory is being offended by the public's apparent lack of civic-mindedness? Certainly the interests of many citizens will be at stake in any policy decision, but it is another thing to presume that democracy requires citizens to exercise vigilance over every interest they may have. The institutions of

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11 Schumpeter writes: "The eighteenth-century philosophy of democracy may be couched in the following definition: the democratic method is that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions which realizes the common good by making the people itself decide issues through the election of individuals who are to assemble in order to carry out its will" (250).

12 In describing the commonalities of the 18th century theorists of representative government, Pateman writes that their "theory of participatory democracy is built round the central assertion that individuals and their institutions cannot be considered in isolation from one- another. The existence of representative institutions at national level is not sufficient for democracy; for maximum participation by all the people at that level socialization, or 'social training', for democracy must take place in other spheres in order that the necessary individual attitudes and psychological qualities can be developed. This development takes place through the process of participation itself. The major function of participation in the theory of participatory democracy is therefore an educative one, educative in the very widest sense, including both the psychological aspect and the gaining of practice in democratic skills and procedures. Thus there is no special problem about the stability of a participatory system; it is self-sustaining through the educative impact of the participatory process. Participation develops and fosters the very qualities necessary for it; the more individuals participate the better they become to do so. Subsidiary hypotheses about participation are that it has an integrated effect and that it aids the acceptance of collective decisions" (42-3). Pateman's emphasis on the educative role of participation in the work of these earlier theorists has since been challenged by Jane Mansbridge (1999a), who argues that while these writers expected some improvement.
The ideal of the citizen informed about matters of policy seems to be of much more recent vintage than many students of public opinion recognize (Natchez 1985). Concern about the information necessary for effective citizenship in Revolutionary War-era America centered narrowly on awareness of the political rights and liberties threatened by the British Crown (Brown 1996). Rather than envisioning a citizenry capable of exercising considered judgment over matters of public policy, throughout most of the 19th century the elite debate over citizen competence in the United States focused on the boundaries of suffrage rights. While the informed citizen existed as an ideal that appeared from time to time in political rhetoric, its practical application was typically in service to the question of which citizens could be trusted to cast a competent vote (Brown 1996). According to Michael Schudson (1998), it was largely in response to the excesses of political corruption in the Gilded Age party system of the late 19th century that Progressive reformers elevated the ideal of the informed citizen to an exalted position in popular versions of "democratic theory." While it is unclear whether this "new textbook model of the citizen – independent, informed, public-spirited and above partisanship" (Schudson 1998: 197) popularized by Progressive-era reformers was solely responsible for coloring later interpretations of "classical democratic theory" by critics like Lippmann and Schumpeter; little doubt remains today that the apparent crisis in democratic theory ushered in by the discovery of an ill-informed public was both overstated and undersupported.

While the foundations of democratic theory are not shaken by the mass public's inattention to politics, the degree of indifference to public affairs nonetheless raises suspicions about the quality of its political evaluations and lowers expectations about the feasible scope of democratic rule. A large literature today suggests that the mass public can rely on a variety of aids to simplify the task of evaluating political candidates, and this work inspires greater faith in the quality of collective decisions registered in elections than did the early studies on voting behavior. The quality of collective preferences may be a different matter, and this book has documented ample reason for doubting the mass public's ability to exercise popular sovereignty through the medium of the opinion survey when that ability is conceived narrowly as skill in evaluating alternative policies. Yet policy evaluations are only one of many types of collective opinion that might be represented by surveys. Over the centuries political philosophers have envisioned a wide variety of alternative roles for citizens to play in democracies, and while different theories of democracy impose different demands on citizens, this philosophical work often suggests that the collective opinions of ordinary citizens could potentially make valuable contributions within the first stage of Price and Neijens' decision scheme. Three such roles for citizens are among the many that have been suggested by political philosophers: citizens might appropriately define the end goals of society, clarify and perhaps prioritize the values that should constrain the actions of political leaders, and identify problems for political action.

Ends Rather Than Means

A running theme in many theories of democracy is that citizen input can be more valuable in determining the ends that a society strives for than the means to attain those ends. Even James Bryce, the patron muse for Gallup's work on political opinion polling, suggests that what citizens can contribute to governance is less analysis of policy options than suggesting a general direction for government action: "It is therefore rather sentiment than thought that the mass can contribute, a sentiment grounded on a few broad considerations and simple trains of reasoning; and the soundness and elevation of their sentiment will have more to do with their taking their stand on the side of justice, honour, and peace, than any reasoning they can apply to the sifting of the multifarious facts thrown before them, and to the drawing of legitimate inferences therefrom" (Bryce 1891: Volume 2, 254). Bryce concludes that "public opinion can determine ends, but is less fit to examine and select means to those ends." (347).

More recent theories of democratic citizenship suggest similar roles for citizens. In Thomas Christiano's (1996) The Rule of the Many, the limits of citizen knowledge about politics are addressed by holding citizens responsible for choosing only the overall aims of society as well as the relative priority of those aims. Formal institutions such as legislatures and executives as well as informal political actors such as interest groups and parties are responsible for choosing the most appropriate means for realizing these ends. These actors are allowed to compromise and barter in the process of selecting means, but all trade-offs are to reflect the relative priorities that citizens assign to societal ends. Likewise, Robert Dahl (1989)
holds that one of the five distinguishing features of a democratic system is the degree of control exercised over the political agenda by ordinary citizens: "The demos must have the exclusive opportunity to decide how matters are to be placed on the agenda of matters that are to be decided by means of the democratic process" (113). Dahl goes so far as to define popular sovereignty in terms of this criterion.

To the extent that surveys focus citizen attention on the means of the policy process rather than its ends, we might wonder whether the form of representation afforded by surveys accords with the roles that citizens play in democratic governance. If citizens are not responsible for developing opinions on particular pieces of legislation, then perhaps the fact that citizens seem not to have thought a great deal about such matters should come as no surprise. In this view, the focus of opinion polls might be placed more appropriately on gathering opinions about the larger ends of society, or on assessing the relative importance of items vying for space on the political agenda.

Values Rather Than Preferences

If it is more important for citizens to form judgments about societal goals rather than about the policies appropriate for attaining those goals, then eliciting a population's collective values rather than its collective preferences over competing policies might prove an especially useful application of the sampling method. Gallup himself emphasized this potential contribution, noting that "the ultimate values of politics and economics, the judgments on which public policy is based, do not come from special knowledge or from intelligence alone. They are compounded from the day-to-day experience of the men and women who together make up the society we live in. That is why public-opinion polls are important today" (Gallup and Rae 1940: 266). The study of values in public opinion research (for reviews, see Kinder 1998; Kinder and Sears 1985) traditionally has been eclipsed by the study of attitudes and preferences, despite findings that values structure the political preferences typically measured in surveys (Feldman 1988; Rokeach 1968), are more predictive of behavior than attitudes (Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube 1984), and may be more central than attitudes in moderating framing effects and, more generally, the processes by which people use information to reach judgments (Bartels 1998; Hochschild 1981; Nelson, Clawson, and Oxley 1997; Sniderman and Theriault 1999). Values seem especially important as a means of assessing the concept of "latent opinion" developed by

V. O. Key (1961) to describe the preferences that a population would likely arrive at were it to become more engaged in and informed about public affairs (Entman and Herbst 2001; Zaller 1994, 1998).

An effort to sound the collective values of a population could focus on assessing the cultural climate in which preferences are produced (Bellah, Madsen et al. 1985; Hunter and Bowman 1996; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Wildaysky 1987), clarifying the tradeoffs between competing values in order to suggest the relative priority of one value relative to another in the eyes of a population (Abramson and Inglehart 1995; Ball-Rokeach, Rokeach, and Grube 1984; Christiano 1996; Inglehart 1997; Rokeach 1968, 1973; Sniderman, Fletcher et al. 1996), and examining the ways that a population applies value judgments when evaluating issues, events, or persons (Feldman 1988; Hochschild 1981; Marcus, Sullivan et al. 1995; McClosky and Zaller 1984). Each of these applications of survey sampling could profitably inform political representatives of a mass public's priorities during the initial "elicitation of values" stage of democratic decision making.

To suggest that this can be done is not to overlook the many challenges entailed in measuring and interpreting collective values. Different assumptions about the meaning of survey responses invite different interpretations of collective values (Clarke, Kornberg et al. 1999; Davis and Davenport 1999; Fischhoff 1991; Inglehart and Abramson 1999), and there is as yet little agreement over which cultural values or behaviors are most relevant to public life (Martin 1984). Moreover, it will be important to differentiate between judgments that assess current issues in light of particular values and judgments about the intrinsic worth or importance of the values themselves. The answer one gets when asking whether a policy is fair or unfair will depend to some extent on the respondent's level of familiarity with the policy, whereas answers to questions asking whether freedom is more important than equality should not depend on possession of special factual information. To be sure, the answers that respondents give to such questions may often covary with their level of political knowledge: while nearly all respondents answer value questions, the size of information effects in collective value judgments are often larger than in collective preferences over policy matters. Nonetheless, there may be good theoretical reasons to discount the relevance or apparent meaning of information effects in collective value judgments in some kinds of collective value judgments. In the theory of justice put forward by John Rawls (1971), for example, claims to equality in matters of justice require only a capacity for moral personality, which Rawls defines as being capable of conceiving of
one's own good and as possessing a sense of justice (504–12). Likewise, Christianity and many other world religions hold that all individuals are to some degree accountable for their actions because each has a basic level of competence and autonomy in matters of moral judgment. If the moral competence of persons – however derived – is held to be inviolable, then a case could be made for ignoring the presence of information effects in certain kinds of collective value judgments.

Problems Rather Than Solutions

Surveys of citizen opinion might also be more useful for identifying or clarifying problems for political action than solutions for political problems. Rather than being limited to defining the larger ends for society as a whole, in this view citizens might have a role in identifying which immediate problems should be the object of government attention. Such a role for citizens was suggested by Edmund Burke, the famous proponent of the trustee model of representation. Although Burke held the political opinions of ordinary citizens in low regard, he recognized that they were often better judges than their representatives of the problems government should address:

The most poor, illiterate, and uninformed creatures upon earth are judges of a practical oppression. It is a matter of feeling; and as such persons generally have felt most of it, and are not of an over-lively sensibility, they are the best judges of it. But for the real cause, or the appropriate remedy, they ought never to be called into council about the one or the other. They ought to be totally shut out; because their reason is weak; because, when once roused, their passions are ungoverned; because they want information; because the smallness of the property which individually they possess renders them less attentive to the consequence of the measures they adopt in affairs of the moment. (quoted in Pitkin 1969: 172, emphasis in original)

Similar arguments have been developed at greater length by a number of political philosophers from within a variety of democratic traditions. John Dewey (1927) understood that a social division of labor made reliance on experts inevitable to some degree. The proper use of experts, to Dewey, lay in recognizing the different roles played by the public and its representatives, and one of the foremost roles for the public was to direct the attention of government toward particular problems: "No government by experts in which the masses do not have the chance to inform the experts as to their needs can be anything but an oligarchy managed in the interests of the few" (208). Ian Shapiro (1999) makes a similar point from a different perspective, arguing that people are better able to identify instances of injustice, when it happens or as they experience it, than they are to identify conditions of justice. His theory of democratic justice is predicated on this fundamental constraint of democratic practice. An especially thoroughgoing defense of the problem-identifying role is developed by Jurgen Habermas (1996a), who argues that public opinion "cannot 'rule' of itself but can only point the use of administrative power in specific directions" (300). The public sphere, he continues, ideally fulfills a particular set of functions for democratic rule:

I have described the political public sphere as a sounding board for problems that must be processed by the political system because they cannot be solved elsewhere. To this extent, the public sphere is a warning system with sensors that, though unspecialized, are sensitive throughout society. From the perspective of democratic theory, the public sphere must, in addition, amplify the pressure of problems, that is, not only detect and identify problems but also convincingly and influentially thematize them, furnish them with possible solutions, and dramatize them in such a way that they are taken up and dealt with by parliamentary complexes. Besides the "signal" function, there must be an effective problematization. The capacity of the public sphere to solve problems on its own is limited. But this capacity must be utilized to oversee the further treatment of problems that are taken place inside the political system. (359, emphasis in original)

Habermas’s conception of the public sphere is built upon a sociological or discursive model of public opinion, and as with Blumer he argues that the functions of the public sphere cannot be carried out properly by opinion surveys. The problem with polls, according to Habermas, is that "the individual preferences expressed in opinion polls do not reliably reflect the actual preferences of the individuals polled, if by 'preferences' one means the preferences they would express after weighing the relevant 13 Dewey (1927) concludes that "Inquiry, indeed, is a work which devolves upon experts. But their expertise is not shown in framing and executing policies, but in discovering and making known the facts upon which the former depend.... It is not necessary that the many should have the knowledge and skill to carry on the needed investigations; what is required is that they have the ability to judge of the bearing of the knowledge supplied by others upon common concerns" (209).

14 Habermas (1996a) writes that "Public opinion is not representative in the statistical sense. It is not an aggregate of individually gathered, privately expressed opinions held by isolated persons. Hence it must not be confused with survey results. Political opinion polls provide a certain reflection of 'public opinion' only if they have been preceded by a focused public debate and a corresponding opinion-formation in a mobilized public sphere" (362). This argument is similar to the one advanced by Daniel Yankelovich (1991).
information and arguments. For the political transformation of values and attitudes is not a process of blind adaptation but the result of a constructive opinion- and will-formation" (1996: 336, emphasis in original). The basis of his concern is the potential disjuncture between surveyed opinion and enlightened preferences. However, the analysis in the preceding chapters shows not only that such disjunctions can be identified, but also that they may be less widespread than Habermas supposes. Although collective preferences may be less suited than organized associations of the mass public to contribute useful information such as town hall meetings or citizen advisory boards (Rosen 1994, 1996). Such a joining of methods ensures a richness of opinion data that can be used to shape news agendas.

Much has been made of the fact that the mass public's perceptions of "most important problems" facing the nation are often influenced by the agenda of national news coverage (for reviews of the agenda-setting literature, see Dearing and Rogers 1996; McCombs, Shaw, and Weaver 1997; Protess and McCombs 1991). While such findings appear to undermine the potential for the mass public to contribute useful information about problems requiring governmental action, it may also be that students of survey data have been emphasizing the wrong kinds of questions. When inviting respondents to diagnose problems experienced collectively by everyone else, it would be surprising indeed if the collective answers to such questions did not reflect the agenda of news coverage. A different approach is suggested by Dewey, who reminds us that "Democracy must begin at home, and its home is the neighborly community" (213). Surveys might more fruitfully gather perceptions of local problems, perceptions that are especially likely to be informed by personal experience. Aggregate

CONCLUSION

After more than a half century of refinement, survey researchers have worked out many of the technical problems with opinion polling and at least adequately understand the remaining ones. Much less attention has been given to the appropriate political uses of the opinion survey in a mass democracy. Despite assurances by public opinion researchers that the public's low levels and uneven social distribution of political knowledge are relatively benign to the functioning of democracy, the mass public is often unable to make up for its inattentiveness. Because of this, the public's imperfect knowledge of politics has important consequences for the ways that opinion surveys are used in democratic politics. Public opinion polling can elevate the clear wishes of the few above the sometimes uncertain, fragmented, and ambivalent desires of the many. Some see this as a benefit. But when collective opinion fails to represent the voices and interests of all citizens in proportion to their numbers, opinion polling may provide a distorted view of public opinion.

One of the root problems with using surveys as a method for furthering popular sovereignty is that there has been no obvious way to tell when the opinions people give in surveys are "wrong" or "right," "good" or "bad," of high or low quality, or the degree to which they reflect political
interests. While aspects of this problem can be clarified with empirical analysis, as this book has attempted to do, addressing it squarely requires that scholars engage in normative inquiry. Given the importance of this topic to democratic politics, its chronic neglect is a sobering testament to the determination of survey researchers for the past half-century to pursue a methodological agenda that allowed normative inquiry to wither on the vine. At the same time, as noted in the first chapter, the philosophical inquiries of political theorists have to this day conspicuously ignored the rise of opinion surveys as a form of collective expression. As a consequence of this neglect from both quarters, normative work in democratic theory is at least implicitly suspicious of surveys as meaningful indicators of public opinion and frequently dismissive of the possibility that they can somehow capture or convey political interests, often without giving sufficient attention to whether its expectations are grounded in fact. Likewise, empirical work tends casually to identify the results of sample surveys with the concept of public opinion, without sufficiently appreciating the normative problems inherent in the use of survey results as a channel for political representation.

Contemporary students of public opinion often seem to overlook the fact that at its most essential and abstract level, public opinion is the power of popular sovereignty, regardless of whether that power is active or passive, realized or unrealized, in the form of elections, polls, groups, or social control. At this root level, the critical questions are all normative and theoretical rather than descriptive or methodological, and tend to revolve around the problem of determining how popular sovereignty might be best exercised and realized. While by no means suggesting that opinion researchers should turn away from their current focus on the descriptive analysis of public opinion, I am persuaded that normative theories of citizenship and democracy generate a particularly appropriate set of questions for students of public opinion to concern themselves with.

To the extent that opinion polling matters politically, in large part it matters as a means to enhance or diminish popular sovereignty. Attention to the particular tasks or functions that opinion polling might best be suited can thus help to optimize the balance between elite and popular control of government. Of course, such attention by itself suggests no answers to thorny normative issues that are intertwined with popular sovereignty, such as the mechanisms through which this control should be carried out, the extent to which government activities should fall under the direct control of citizens, and the time lag over which popular control might best be brought into play (frequently and immediately, as with the delegate model of representation, or infrequently and over the longer term, in the case of the trustee model). Yet it may be that a renewed appreciation of these questions can move the debate over the political role of opinion surveys into a more fruitful season than seems currently to be the case.

The problem of popular sovereignty in democratic politics has traditionally invited three contradictory solutions: either the government must be run for the people, because they are unfit to rule; or the people must be better governed, to make them fit to rule; or the government should pay more attention to the people, because they only appear unfit to rule. This book shows that none of these offers a compelling response to the problem of popular disengagement from politics. The people’s indifference toward public affairs complicates the effective exercise of popular sovereignty, but does not preclude it.

The cynicism of some who dismiss opinion polls as vacuous is unwarranted. On many issues the public provides collective preferences that are quite similar to fully informed opinions. At the same time, collective opinion is often a far cry from what it might look like if the mass public were better informed. The dynamics of preference aggregation thus present two challenges: to the extent that opinion surveys are seen as irrelevant to political decision making, we risk mistaking the public’s reasoned judgment for what Hamilton called a “sudden breeze of passion,” and the democratic project must surely suffer as a result. But to the extent that surveys are taken at face value as accurate measures of public opinion, we risk misreading the voice of the few as the will of the many.