

**SILENT VOICES:
PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION IN AMERICA**

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Chapter 1: Participation, Public Opinion, and the Voice of the People

Throughout his eight years as president, the recurrent image of Bill Clinton was that of a weather vane, constantly shifting to and fro in response to the fickle political winds of opinion polls. “Clinton's legacy is in many ways a story about polls,” writes John F. Harris of the Washington Post, capturing a prominent view of Clinton. “It is true that no previous president read public opinion surveys with the same hypnotic intensity. And no predecessor has integrated his pollster so thoroughly into the policymaking operation of his White House” (Harris 2000). Even Clinton’s own staffers take the view that he was too reliant on polls. As Harris notes, former Clinton aid George Stephanopoulos and former Labor Secretary Robert Reich both wrote memoirs that recalled bitterly Clinton's reliance on consultants and polling.

Given the derisive tone of such portrayals, one might think that George W. Bush, Clinton’s Republican successor in the White House would carefully avoid such a shallow appearance. Not surprisingly, during the 2000 campaign, Bush repeatedly claimed that “we take stands without having to run polls and focus groups to tell us where we stand” (Carney and Dickerson 2000). As president, Bush publicly sought to distance himself from a Clinton-esque reliance on polls. During a press conference concerning tax reform in May, 2001, for example, Bush argued that “I'm not really that concerned about standing in polls. I am doing what I think is the right thing to do. And the right thing to do is to have proposed a tax relief package that is an integral part of a fiscal policy that makes sense.”

But though Bush may have claimed not to care about polls, he continued to fund a polling apparatus comparable in scope to that of the Clinton Administration. To be precise, the Bush administration was kept abreast of public opinion through polls and focus groups paid for by the RNC and conducted by Bush's former campaign pollster, Matthew Dowd (Hall 2001).

Such developments should not surprise those who follow American politics. Though it may be an open question as to whether politicians pander to opinion polls, or use those polls to craft support for their preferred policies (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), what is not in dispute is that polls lie at the center of American politics. Polls provide the most obvious and ongoing link between citizens and their leaders. Regardless of one's views of the polling enterprise, the fact remains that surveys have become a critical mechanism for the communication of information between the mass public and political elites. Thus, understanding how well polls represent the underlying preferences and perspectives of the public is a critical concern. It is this question that motivates this book.

Public Opinion and Representation

Coming to grips with representation in a democratic society is a tricky business. Over time, a number of conceptions of representation have emerged, each prescribing a somewhat different role for the representative and the represented. But though representation may be a multifaceted, nuanced concept, in every discussion of representation one central point stands out. The connection between the representative and the constituency – however it may be defined – lies at the heart of representation.

In her seminal work, *The Concept of Representation*, Pitkin (1967) identifies several distinct strands of representation, ranging from the formalistic representative – who “acts for” his constituents’ interests – to the descriptive representative – who looks like or mirrors his constituency. In the end, Pitkin concludes that no individual conception of representation sufficiently captures the full meaning of that concept. Thus, a representative must juggle and combine many diverse concerns. She must stand for her constituency, meaning that she must resemble that constituency and bring its concerns and perspectives to the political stage. At the same time, a representative must act for that constituency, meaning that she must take their preferences into account when taking political action. Finally, a representative must, ultimately, be accountable to her constituency.¹ These concerns extend beyond the simple dyadic relationship between a single legislator and his or her constituency. For example, systems of collective representation (Weissberg 1976, 1978) – between a legislative body taken as a whole and the nation as a whole – touch upon many of the same concerns identified by Pitkin.

Both legislative and constituent responsiveness are critical to the connection between the mass public and political elites. The expression of the public will – public opinion – is therefore essential to the effective functioning of a representative democracy. The exact role that public opinion should play in the political process is, however, an open question. After all, the “conversation of representation” between citizens and their political agents may take several forms.

¹ This is not to say that Pitkin’s view is the last word on representation. Mansbridge (1998) argues that Pitkin’s conception of representation is lacking in several respects. Pitkin, for example, does not consider many of the implications of a system of collective representation. However, Pitkin’s work remains important because it identifies several controversies central to the study of representation.

Much of the empirical work in political science has assessed the representativeness of government action by measuring the degree of congruence between the views of constituents and the actions of their representatives.² Miller and Stokes (1963) provided the archetype for this paradigm in their study of the correlation between the votes and views of congressmen on the one hand, and the preferences of their constituencies, on the other.

The direct link between public opinion and elite action is undoubtedly an important component of representation. Under some circumstances, public opinion may play a direct role in determining policy direction. But such a direct link cannot be the whole of representation. Equating the public's will with representative action, as Pitkin notes, debases the concept. Representatives who cater to their constituency's every whim are little more than mouthpieces for those constituencies. Such representatives lack the capacity for independent action necessary for political decision-making. Thus, an excessive focus on the congruence between public opinion and government policy – what McCrone and Kuklinski (1979) term the “input-demand” conception of representation – presents an inadequate picture of representative democracy in action.³ This is not to say that the input-demand paradigm is misguided or incorrect. Rather, it is incomplete.

² See, for example, Achen 1978, Bernstein 1989, Erikson 1978, Miller and Stokes 1963, Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson 1995.

³ This paradigm is limited in other important ways. Demonstrating that constituent opinion correlates with congressional action is not the same as showing that constituent opinion *causes* such action. Significant correlations (or any measure of congruence) could instead indicate that congressional action leads constituent opinion (Carmines and Stimson 1989), or the relationship between popular opinion and government action might be reciprocal (Hill and Anderson 1995). Representational studies must, therefore, distinguish between constituent influence and simple agreement between constituent opinion and legislative action resulting from shared opinions.

Public opinion is not simply a source of demands – the “wish list” of a whiney child. Even if representatives do not follow lockstep with public opinion, the public’s will may still play an important role in the process of governance. In *Public Opinion and Democracy*, V.O. Key argued that public opinion provides a broad guide for public action, by serving as “a system of dikes which channel public action or which fix a range of discretion within which government may act or within which debate at official levels may proceed” (1961, 552).⁴ By defining the broad purpose of government, then, public opinion can play an important role in representative government, placing limits on the manner and substance of government action without directly determining that action (see also Stimson 1991). Public opinion, in this view, does not merely demand; it also communicates information about the wants, needs, and desires of a constituency.

Such information is important to representatives, because if they decide to depart from the will of their constituency, they must provide a reasonable justification for their actions. Kingdon (1973) finds that congressmen seek to avoid the uncomfortable task of taking a position opposed to that of their constituents. However, when they feel strongly enough to take such a position, they will “explain” their votes to their constituency before deviating from the wishes of those they represent. One reason for this course of action is that representatives know if they depart too far from their constituencies, they will eventually be replaced through the electoral process (see Erikson 1978; Fiorina 1974;

⁴ This notion of public opinion as constraining public policy is perhaps better suited to a collective notion of representation, where the focus of analysis shifts from single constituency-representative relationships to *groups* of such relationships. In addition, the move to a collective conception of representation allows for a broader view of the representation process. As Mansbridge (1998) notes, the quality of communication between the government and the people depends on all formal and informal channels of communication – including political parties, the media, interest groups, and opinion polls – not just the dyadic relationship between a specific constituency and a particular representative.

Mayhew 1974). Even if a congresswomen deviates from constituent opinion on a single vote, if she does not provide an adequate explanation for the vote, she opens the door for an opponent to raise that deviation as a campaign issue in future elections. As Arnold (1990) notes, both existing opposition to a particular policy and potential opposition to that policy are powerful constraints when legislators are deciding which side to support on a given vote.⁵

In sum, the representative process, like Pitkin suggests, is not only about keeping political promises and acquiescing to constituent demands; representation is also about ensuring the effective communication of preferences between the mass public and political elites. Representation, in short, is a two-way street. Public opinion serves a meaningful and ongoing role in facilitating such communication.

Measuring Public Opinion

The central question, then, is not whether public opinion should matter in a democratic system. Democracy can not function without some form of mass input into the political process. We must therefore consider how public opinion should be measured and accounted for by actors in the political system. How should we determine what the public thinks about the issues of the day; how do we gauge their politically relevant wants, needs, and desires?

⁵ At a more general level, an important component of an effective “homestyle” – how a representative relates to her constituency – is fostering the trust of that constituency (Fenno 1978). By explaining her political decisions, a representative can build this trust and, by association, reinforce and build upon her supporting coalitions.

Over the years, a variety of techniques have been used to measure the public's will in democratic societies. In ancient Greece, oratory and rhetoric served as the forum for public ideas (Herbst 1993). In the 18th Century, the salons and coffeehouses of Europe were important venues for the expression and assessment of public opinion (Herbst 1993; Herzog 1998). During the course of the 19th Century, political and quasi-political institutions such as general elections, straw polls and the popular press emerged, which allowed elites to gauge the interests of broader segments of the population.⁶ Each of these developments served to expand the repertoire of political opinion expression and collection (Sanders 1999; Tilly 1983)

In the modern day, politicians are able to use a variety of techniques to gather information about the preferences and perspectives of the mass public. Legislators can attend to the mail they receive from constituents (Bauer, Pool, and Dexter 1963; Herbst 1993; Kingdon 1973). Or politicians can look to interest groups and lobbyists as surrogates for public opinion (Herbst 1998). Still other policy-makers may gauge public sentiment by estimating the relative size of groups engaged in protest activities (Herbst 1993).

While these traditional forms of opinion articulation remain important in political life, over the course of the Twentieth Century, a new measurement tool has been added to the repertoire – opinion polls or surveys. Polls pervade the modern political environment. For instance, polls serve as the primary source of information for the media about the

⁶ The development of general elections did more than simply allow elites to cast a wider net when gauging popular sentiment. As Herbst (1993) notes, elections represent a turning point in the measurement of public opinion because they require the private communication of opinion. This quality stands in stark contrast to the earlier techniques which required the public expression of one's political views (see also Sanders 1999).

mass public's views concerning current political controversies and have become a major component of political reporting (Frankovic 1992). By way of illustration, a 1989 Roper study found that over 80 percent of American newspapers were directly involved in some form of opinion polling (Ladd and Benson 1992; see Brehm 1993, chapter 1 for evidence of the pervasiveness of polls).⁷ At the very least, polls are difficult for actors in the political system to ignore. And there is little to indicate that politicians would want to ignore polls even if they could. Politicians are willing to expend large sums on polling operations. One study, for example, found that the amount of money spent on opinion polling by politicians grew from \$6 million in 1964 to \$40 million in 1984 (Crespi 1989). Recent studies estimate that candidates spend well over \$100 million during each campaign season (Warren 2001). Given the size of this investment, it would be surprising only if politicians did not pay some attention to opinion polls. In fact, journalistic accounts of the relationship between politicians and political consultants suggest that politicians are extremely reliant on their pollsters (see Moore 1992, Morris 1997).⁸ Moreover, a recent poll of policy leaders conducted by the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation in collaboration with Public Perspective found that a large plurality (46 percent) of those

⁷ While many media-sponsored polls measure candidate support in forthcoming elections, not all media polls are "horserace polls" of this sort. In fact a large number of polls – 40 percent in election years and 70 percent in off years – do not deal with horseraces (Ladd and Benson 1992). Thus the media are concerned not only with who is ahead in a given election, but also with the public's views on current political controversies.

⁸ Of course, there are reasons to question Morris's account of his service at the White House. To argue his interests would be served by exaggerating his closeness to Clinton would be an understatement. That said, by all accounts, Morris had an extremely close relationship with Clinton, thereby underscoring the importance that – at least some – politicians attribute to polls as a source of information about the views of the mass public.

leaders believed that polls were the “best way for officials to learn what the majority of people in our country think about important issues.”⁹

The question, then, is not whether polls are superior or inferior to other forms of participation. Instead, we must look at polls in combination with other forms of political expression and assess whether jointly they provide an accurate picture of what the American public wants from government. Polls, after all, have not replaced traditional forms of participation. Instead, they provide a complement to those forms, increasing politicians’ ability to gather information concerning popular preferences.

Political Participation and the Voice of the People

There is a fundamental tension in American politics between on the one hand a desire to ensure political equality and, on the other, a belief that the intensity of individual interests should somehow matter in the political process. As Dahl puts it, the problem is how to construct a political system such that “an apathetic majority only slightly preferring its alternative could not override a minority strongly preferring its alternative” (1956, 92). In other – slightly less elegant – terms, we need a system that is “designed to inhibit a relatively apathetic majority from cramming its policy down the throats of a relatively intense majority” (1956, 90). How should we, for example, resolve a situation in which 55 percent of the population weakly prefers one course of action, while 45 percent strongly prefers the opposite course?

⁹ The response with the second highest support was “town hall meetings” with 31 percent. The policy leader sample included 300 senior executive branch officials, senior congressional staff members, think tank scholars, lobbyists, trade association executives, and two members of Congress. They were interviewed December 21, 2000 through March 30, 2001.

There are no easy answers to questions of this sort. But, to make the compromises and tradeoffs essential to the functioning of a political system, we need information about both the direction and intensity of the public will. When considering the place of public opinion in the government process, then, it is important to strike a balance that both enables the broad expression of political views and recognizes that some preferences are more intensely held than others. If, as argued above, representation is about the communication of politically relevant information, to fail on either count would leave us with an inadequate picture of the public's will. At first glance, it appears that – in combination – direct participation and opinion polls can fill both these criteria.

Direct political participation facilitates well the transmission of intense preferences and perspectives to political elites. If citizens care enough about a particular issue, they may convey their particular wants, needs, and desires to the government in a variety of ways. They may, as noted above, contact political officials, or become involved in campaigns. Because the civic sphere in America is relatively permeable and citizens are free to voice matters of concern to them, traditional forms of participation do a fair job of ensuring that intense interests are heard in the political process.¹⁰

While participation may represent adequately some intense interests, it does a poor job of guaranteeing political equality. Political activists, after all, do not come to the political world by chance. Instead, they are drawn disproportionately from those groups

¹⁰ Of course, this is not true for *all* issues. The two party system in America undoubtedly serves to restrict certain issues from reaching the policymaking table altogether (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Schattschneider 1960). But the point here is a relative, not an absolute, comparison. No form of political participation perfectly represents the interests of the mass public. Thus, we need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of participation in relation to each other. Here, then, I speak of the *relative* benefits and shortcomings of direct participation.

more advantaged in the resources that aid participation – such as education and disposable income. Activists therefore differ in politically consequential ways from those who do not engage in politics. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady conclude, “the voice of the people as expressed through participation comes from a limited and unrepresentative set of citizens” (1995, 2). The guarantee of free political expression, in other words, does not ensure the equal expression of the political wants, needs, and desires of all members of the public. Some interests might be muted, not because citizens lack concerns relevant to a particular controversy, but instead because they have difficulty making themselves heard on the political stage. For example, those citizens who directly benefit from government aid programs by and large lack the economic and civic resources necessary to contribute to political candidates or effectively petition their representatives on their own behalf (see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Where traditional forms of participation fail, opinion polls may succeed. Polls have several shortcomings. But whatever their weaknesses, polls do seem to guarantee that a full spectrum of political interests will be heard in the political system. The reason is straightforward: surveys, if executed correctly, are conducted through random sampling. Under this system, every citizen has an equal chance of being selected to be heard in a poll, regardless of his or her personal circumstance. Furthermore, by underwriting the direct costs of participation, opinion polls ensure that disparities in politically relevant resources will not discourage the expression of politically relevant thoughts. In short, polls hold special appeal as a form of gauging the public’s will because they appear to be free of the compositional bias that plagues traditional forms of participation.

This conception of opinion polls as “broadly representative” of public sentiment has long pervaded academic and popular discussions of polls. In 1939, polling pioneer George Gallup advanced the virtues of surveys as a means for political elites to assess the collective “mandate of the people.” If properly designed and conducted, Gallup argued, polls would act as a “sampling referendum” and provide a more accurate measure of popular opinion than more traditional methods, such as reading mail from constituents and attending to newspapers (see also Gallup and Rae 1940). This belief also pervaded popular contemporary treatments of polling.¹¹ Trumpeting “America Speaks” – a weekly presentation of polling data from Gallup’s American Institute of Public Opinion, carried by several newspapers in the mid-1930s – *The Washington Post* claimed that polling was “a scientifically accurate and strictly impartial means of making the voice of all the people articulate.”¹² “America Speaks,” the *Post* claimed, would reveal popular sentiment by giving “authoritative answers learned through a scientific, unbiased national poll which includes every county in every state in which men and women of every political belief and every economic status participated.”¹³

More recently, Verba has argued, “sample surveys provide the closest approximation to an unbiased representation of the public because participation in a

¹¹ Some researchers advocated using opinion surveys as a measure of the public will in other forums as well. Waterbury (1953) advocated the use of opinion surveys in some civil litigation cases. Waterbury suggests, for example, that an opinion poll could be used to justify a manufacture’s claim that it engaged in truth in advertising. If the majority of consumers agreed that that the product in question was not worse than advertised, the judge could use that as a basis to uphold the company’s claim.

¹² Interestingly, the *Washington Post* implicitly compares the impartial nature of polls to the inherent biases of the popular press. Specifically, they underscore the impartiality of polls by pointing to the fact the surveys were designed in consultation with newspapers from across the ideological and political spectrum.

¹³ I am indebted to Larry Bartels for providing me with these materials.

survey requires no resources and because surveys eliminate the bias inherent in the fact that participants in politics are self-selected ... surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce – equal representation of all citizens” (1996, 3; See also Geer 1996). Even critics of the survey research enterprise have adopted the populist conception embodied in the work of Gallup and Verba. Herbst writes, “Modern survey techniques enable the pollster to draw a representative sample of Americans ... the public expression techniques of the past – such as coffeehouses, salons, and petitions – did not allow for such comprehensive representation of the entire public’s views” (1993, 166). Ginsberg (1986), offers further criticisms of polls precisely because they are *too* inclusive of popular sentiment. Surveys, he argues, dilute the intensity of those political actors who choose to make their voices heard on the public stage. As Ginsberg writes, “polls underwrite or subsidize the costs of eliciting, organizing, and publicly expressing opinion...as a result, the beliefs of those who care relatively little or even hardly at all are as likely to be publicized as the opinions of those who care a great deal about the matter in question” (1986, 64).

What Gallup and Verba see as a virtue, Ginsberg labels a sin, but these differences are purely normative. At an empirical level, there is a general agreement on one point among both academics and professionals, be they proponents or opponents of the polling enterprise: opinion polls are broadly representative of popular sentiment. Thus, while surveys may be limited in several respects, they appear to provide a requisite egalitarian compliment to traditional forms of political participation. They seem to balance the biased voice of traditional forms of participation by enabling the broad expression of political interests and thereby allowing citizens to communicate their

preferences and perspectives to those responsible for legislating and implementing public policy. Polls can provide – at least in theory – a clear picture of the public’s will, which can then be used both to aid political elites in the decision-making process and to gauge the adequacy of political representation in the course of policy formation. Through opinion polls, the voice of “the people,” writ broadly, may be heard.

In practice, however, such a view might prove to be overly optimistic. The egalitarian promise of polls rests in part on the belief that polls can not only reach all potential respondents but also that they can extract meaningful information regarding the politically relevant wants, needs, and desires of the respondents they do reach. But polling is not a straightforward, purely technical undertaking. As pollster Burns Roper notes, “opinion research is part art and part science” (1983, 303). The egalitarian potential of polls may be subverted in a number of ways by the demands of the polling enterprise.

Such difficulties may arise before even a single respondent is interviewed. Prior to measuring public opinion through a poll, a researcher must first select a group of individuals to serve as potential respondents. So, for example, if a researcher is interested in studying members of the voting-age public, she must collect a list of *all* members of that public.¹⁴ This process is known as drawing a sampling frame.

Drawing a sampling frame can be difficult, especially if a researcher wants to represent the entire mass public. Some individuals may inadvertently – or even

¹⁴ Of course, not all sampling is done by drawing a simple random sample from a list of the target population – the population of interest for study (Kalton 1983). But the central point here remains true of any sampling undertaking. If the target population can not be defined as the survey population – the population of potentially contactable respondents – some individuals of interest will be excluded from an opinion poll before a single call is made.

advertently – be excluded from a poll’s sampling frame, meaning that they have no chance of being selected to participate in the survey. For example, about 5 percent of American households do not have telephones. Individuals living in these households, therefore, have no chance of being included in telephone surveys. Such people tend to be poorer and older than those individuals who live in households with telephones. Thus, in practice, personal resources might play a role in determining whose voice is heard in an opinion poll and whose voice is lost. In theory, however, if a sampling frame for the full population of interest – here the American public – can be constructed, every individual has an equal chance of being selected to participate in the poll. Under such circumstances, perhaps the egalitarian promise of surveys can be met.

But even with a proper sampling frame, biases could develop in measures of public opinion. In any survey some respondents refuse to participate in the poll. Other respondents cannot be found by the poll’s sponsors. These individuals are completely lost from the final measures of aggregate opinion. Furthermore, this phenomenon of survey non-response has become an increasingly serious problem over the last 40 years.¹⁵ Surveys by academic organizations, such as the National Election Study and the General Social Survey, have non response rates between 25 and 30 percent, up from 15 to 20 percent in the 1950s (Brehm 1993; Luevano 1994).¹⁶ Non-response rates at the

¹⁵ This type of non-response – where we have no information about the selected respondent – is known as *unit* non-response. Such non-response is distinct from *item* non-response, where we have some information about the respondent, but we are missing data for the variable of interest. The empirical analyses presented in this paper are concerned with correcting for item non-response.

¹⁶ Much of this rise in unit non-response can be attributed to increasing refusal rates. In 1952 six percent of potential respondents refused to be interviewed by NES. By 1986, this number had risen to 26 percent. Recent NES studies have had somewhat lower refusal rates, but still in the present day, over 20 percent of the sample refuses to be interviewed (Luevano 1994).

commercial polling houses that produce the majority of polling information in circulation in the political world, though not well documented, are often even higher.

These relatively high rates of non-response are potentially problematic to the representativeness of opinion polls. As Verba himself concedes, those individuals who respond to polls are not perfectly representative of the mass public. In the NES, for example, non-respondents tend to be worse-off financially, are more likely to be black, and are more likely to live in rural areas than those who respond to surveys (Brehm 1993).¹⁷ Thus, the very process of contacting individuals might threaten the egalitarian promise of opinion polls.

But somewhat surprisingly, the existence of significant differences between respondents and non-respondents does not seem to undermine the representativeness of polls. While it is no simple matter to determine the effects of non-response on survey estimates of public opinion, the existing work on this topic suggests that it may not, in practice, affect estimates of the public's will. For example, in his analysis of NES data, Brehm finds that while non-respondents may differ in significant ways from survey respondents, accounting for non-response does not much alter estimates of public opinion

¹⁷ It should be noted that simply because some groups underrepresented in the political arena – such as the less well off – are overrepresented in opinion polls, does not mean the compositional bias found in traditional forms of participation is over-compensated or even corrected in opinion polls. Brehm finds that those who participate in surveys are those who are most interested and most likely to participate in the political world. Thus, individuals who participate in surveys may be unrepresentative of their demographic group. Brehm, for example, concludes that – as is the case with traditional forms of participation (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995) – surveys attract the least representative individuals of the lower economic classes.

on political matters.¹⁸ In sum, this work provides a reassuring balm for the notions of egalitarianism. While the failure of certain individuals to respond to surveys should, in theory, prove damaging to the ability of opinions polls to accurately measure the public's will, in practice it appears that the threat may not be serious.

But, the story does not end here. Even these reassuring results may not rescue the egalitarian notions of public opinion. After pollsters secure the cooperation of respondents, they must elicit pertinent information from those respondents. Pollsters

¹⁸ Furthermore, while Brehm argued in the early 1990s that worsening response rates could create a situation where estimates of aggregate political opinions are unreliable (1993, Chapter 8), recent experiments suggest that these pessimistic predictions might not be met in practice. In 1998, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press conducted a survey experiment to assess the effects of non-response. Two separate samples were drawn for parallel surveys which included the exact same questions. The first "standard" survey was conducted over a five day period and used polling techniques typical of professional survey houses (though not typical of the NES). The second survey was conducted over eight weeks, which allowed the interviewers to contact highly mobile respondents and convince some reluctant respondents to agree to be interviewed. Although, as expected, the response rates differed greatly across the two samples – 42 percent in the standard sample, compared to 71 percent in the extended sample – the picture of the public's will did not differ significantly across the two surveys. The average difference in the aggregate political attitudes of the two groups was just 2.7 percent, less than the margin of errors of the surveys. The samples also were statistically equivalent in their media use and in the background correlates of political opinion. The samples did, however, differ in ways that we would expect from Brehm's work. The standard sample underrepresented whites, the highly affluent, and the well educated. However, these differences underscore the fact that sample differences do not necessarily change the picture of aggregate opinion. Only a handful of questions differed by more than three or four percentage points. Some of this difference, moreover, appeared to reflect actual changes in opinion between June, when both surveys began, and August, when the extended survey was completed. For example, 34 percent of the respondents in the standard sample said that Republicans and Democrats had been working together to solve problems rather than "bickering and opposing one another." Conversely, 40 percent of respondents in the extended sample said that the two parties had been cooperating. But this difference may reflect the fact that Democrats and Republican *had* been cooperating on the balanced budget bill that summer. Supporting such a view, a separate Pew poll conducted in August found that 43 percent of respondents said that the two parties had been working together more.

cannot, after all, read the minds of the public. They must draw out relevant information by means of the interactive social and cognitive process of the survey interview. In many cases, pollsters may achieve their goal. But, in other cases, the interview could go awry and the information collected may reflect poorly public sentiment on the issues of the day.

And here is where my story begins. In the rest of this book, I will make the case that the very process of collecting information concerning the public's preferences through surveys may bias our picture of those preferences. Put another way, the first principle of opinion polls – that they provide a representative picture of the will of the people – may be faulty. As a result, the communication channels between the mass public and their representatives may be flawed – and flawed in ways that have important implications not just for opinion polling but public participation more generally.

The Argument in Brief

In order for polls to measure accurately the public will, a set of fairly strong individual-level assumptions about the way in which citizens approach being interviewed by pollsters must be met. We must first assume that all individuals will – given the chance – express their views to the interviewer. Second, we must assume that the answers that individuals express (or do not express) in opinion surveys are a fair representation of their underlying individual interests.

These assumptions, until tested, remain just that – assumptions. And while reasonable, they may or may not hold in practice. During the question-answering process individual respondents might vanish from our estimates of the public will in such a way

that undermines the egalitarian promise of opinion polls. Opinion surveys are long affairs consisting of many, sometimes scores of, questions. Some respondents who agree to participate in a survey do not answer particular questions on that survey. By volunteering a “don’t know” response, segments of the population are effectively removing themselves from measures of the collective will of the public – their political voice is simply not heard.¹⁹ These withdrawals are inconsequential to the flow of information regarding the preferences and perspectives of the mass public to the extent that such decisions are random. However, if abstention from a survey question follows predictable and systematic patterns across individuals, public opinion, as read in polls, may suffer from what I call in this book “exclusion bias.” Such bias could threaten the representational relationships central to the functioning of a democracy. Representatives seeking information concerning the full spectrum of the public’s preferences may, in fact, be privy to only a partial picture of the public’s wants, needs, and desires. It is critical, then, to ascertain the nature of information lost through individual decisions to say they “don’t know” where they stand on given controversies. Perhaps these don’t knows conceal an uncertain or ambivalent portion of the citizenry. Or perhaps more systematic processes are at work. Without a careful examination of those respondents who choose to remain silent, we cannot know.

Thus, to determine whether the egalitarian promise of opinion polls is met in practice we need to pay close attention not just to who is missing from a survey, but also

¹⁹ This type of non-response – where we have some information about the selected respondent but are missing data for the variable of interest – is known as *item* non-response. Such non-response is distinct from *unit* non-response, where we have no information about the respondent. The empirical analyses presented in this paper are concerned with correcting for item non-response.

to what happens once members of the public agree to be interviewed. Such an examination must start at the individual level, with an understanding of the process by which individuals answer survey questions. While it is aggregate public opinion that matters in a political system, opinion polls measure the opinions of the public one individual at a time. By taking a bottom-up approach in this way, we may examine how don't know responses might arise and begin to understand how those responses may bias measures of public opinion. Under some circumstances, contrary to the claims of Gallup and Verba, polls will not make up for the inequalitarian shortcomings of other forms of political participation. Instead, they may echo and even reinforce those shortcomings.

Outline of Chapters

In the next two chapters, I explore how exclusion bias might arise in measures of public opinion – and how we can correct for such biases. Specifically, I consider how to conceptualize the information sent through public opinion polls. Is this information an accurate reflection of underlying public sentiment on issues of concern to government? How might polls prove to be unrepresentative measures of collective opinion?

I start down this path in Chapter 2 by examining how it is that citizens approach the survey interview. If we wish to draw information about public opinion from individual level survey data, we need to begin by understanding the behavior of those individuals. My analyses therefore begin with a discussion of how individuals come first to form and then to express opinions on political matters. Here I draw upon theories of attitude formation and memory structure from recent literature at the intersection of cognitive and social psychology to understand the cognitive processes of opinion

formation. This work builds upon the leading models of the survey response in the political science literature advanced most forcibly by Zaller and Feldman (1992). In addition, I draw upon social psychological and socio-linguistic models of interpersonal relations to understand the social processes of opinion expression. Psychologists have long recognized that the environment of the survey setting could have potentially significant effects on the nature of the opinions individuals express. I therefore go beyond existing models of the survey response in political science by considering how the dynamics of individual interaction can have politically consequential effects on political polls. Specifically, I explore the effects of the social interactions of the survey setting on the opinions individuals express (and do not express) in this setting. In this way, I recognize the importance of both the cognitive dimension of attitude formation and the social dimension of opinion expression.

I then explore the implications of these theories of the survey process for the construction of collective opinion, explicitly moving from the individual to the aggregate level. By volunteering a “don’t know” response, segments of the population are effectively removing themselves from aggregate opinion. These withdrawals are inconsequential for our understanding of the collective voice of the people to the extent that such decisions are random. However, serious political consequences may arise if the decision to abstain from survey questions follows predictable and systematic patterns either in the process of opinion formation or the process of opinion expression.

In Chapter 3, I move to an explicitly political context and identify those conditions where public opinion polls might foster opinion distortions. Certainly, the gap between survey results and the public’s underlying wants, needs, and desires is greater

for some issues than it is for others. I therefore describe those instances where we should expect surveys to fall short of their egalitarian ideal. To identify those situations, I move from an examination of individual political cognition to a discussion of the social and political context in which the survey interview takes place. I examine the effects of the larger context in determining the types of issues where distortions are possible, if not likely. Specifically, I outline a two-dimensional typology of issue difficulty.

Carmines and Stimson (1980) have argued that particular issues may be “hard” if they require careful consideration of technically difficult choices. “Easy” issues, on the other hand, are those familiar to large portions of the mass public and may be structured by gut responses. This cognitive aspect of an issue – the formative or cognitive complexity of an issue – defines the first dimension of my typology. The second dimension of my typology captures the ease of attitude elicitation in a respondent’s report of their beliefs to the survey interviewer on particular political topics. The measurement of public sentiment concerning sensitive, or “touchy” topics may be hindered by respondents’ attempts to avoid violating the social norms that govern everyday conversations. Put simply, issues may be easy and hard not only in the cognitive sense described by Carmines and Stimson, but also in a social sense. This two-dimensional conception of issue difficulty leads to specific predictions concerning the presence of exclusion bias in measures of public opinion. As issues become more difficult, in both a cognitive and a social sense, the potential for bias increases.

In the second portion of Chapter 3, I lay out the analytic strategy I will use in the rest of the book to measure the nature and direction of biases in public opinion. The key to this empirical enterprise is to ascribe interests to people who do not provide answers to

survey questions. These interests can then be compared to the picture of the public will gleaned in opinion polls and differences between the two groups can be assessed.

To begin this process, it is first necessary to examine the link between the decision to provide an answer to a given survey question, on the one hand, and the position taken on the question on the other. We need to take a close look at the “ingredients” of individual opinion and see how the factors that determine the direction of response are related to the factors that determine whether the respondents will offer an opinion on a given question. Insofar as these two sets of factors are closely related, the potential for the creation of misrepresentative public opinion is great. For example, as I discuss later, I find that the politically relevant resources – such as education and income – that facilitate the formation of coherent and consistent opinions on social welfare policies also predispose citizens to oppose the maintenance and expansion of welfare state programs. Thus, public opinion on social welfare policy controversies gives disproportionate weight to respondents opposed to expanding the government’s role in the economy.

We can then use what we know about the opinions of the question-answers to characterize the opinions of those individuals who declined to answer the question. In effect, we can determine what the non-answerers would have said if they were willing and able to give voice to their underlying politically relevant wants, needs, and desires. This done, we can compare the unexpressed political voice of these citizens to that of those individuals who answer survey questions. In this way, we can determine what opinion polls reveal, and – more importantly – what they conceal. But the strategy is not in itself complete. Given that I assess the difference between these two groups, in part, by

imputing interests to individuals who opted out of answering survey questions, a healthy degree of skepticism is understandable. Where possible, then, I look for external confirmation of my results.

The next three chapters of the book examine the development of representational bias in opinion polls within different policy areas. Specifically, I examine public opinion across three diverse issue areas – race, social welfare policy, and war.²⁰ In this way, I identify the ways in which those who abstain from survey questions differ from those who answer such questions and trace out the political implications of these differences.

In Chapter 4, I explicitly take up the effects of the social dynamics of the survey interview on public opinion. Specifically, I examine the consequences of social desirability concerns on the expression of the public voice. I present analysis of NES data from the early 1990s which show that public opinion polls overstate support for government efforts to integrate schools. I find that some individuals who harbor anti-integrationist sentiments are likely to mask their socially unacceptable opinions by abstaining from questions concerning those issues. Such actions ensure that a significant base of opinion remains unheard through opinion polls. I also find similar effects in opinion concerning support for government intervention to guarantee jobs. Moreover, the same methods which predict that opinion polls understate opposition to government involvement in school integration also allow me to predict more accurately the results of the 1989 New York City mayoral election. Finally I use data from the early 1970s to show that the strong social desirability effects found in the 1990s do not characterize opinion in the earlier era. All told, these results suggest that surveys concerning

²⁰ In doing so, I adopt a strategy similar to Miller and Stokes' study of constituency influence in Congress in the 1950s.

government intervention to ensure racial equality – and more generally questions on racial attitudes – may provide an inaccurate picture of underlying public sentiment, depending on the larger social context in which the survey interview takes place.

In Chapter 5 I consider equality of political voice in the realm of social welfare policy. This analysis indicates that expressed public opinion on matters of the distribution of economic resources is unrepresentative of the views of the public writ large. Using data over the last 30 years concerning questions of economic redistribution, I find that public opinion on these matters holds a conservative bias. Specifically, I demonstrate that both inequalities in politically relevant resources and the larger political culture surrounding social welfare policy issues disadvantage those groups who are natural supporters of the welfare state. These supporters – the economically disadvantaged and those who support principles of political equality – are less able to form coherent and consistent opinions on such policies than those well endowed with politically relevant resources. Those predisposed to champion the maintenance and expansion of welfare state programs are, as a result, less likely to articulate opinions on surveys. The “voice” of those who abstain from the social welfare policy questions is different from those who respond to such items. This result mirrors the patterns of inequality found in traditional forms of political participation. Opinion polls may therefore echo, not correct, the inegalitarian shortcomings of traditional forms of political participation.

Finally, in Chapter 6, I turn to the question of war in the context of the Vietnam War. I demonstrate that the imbalance in political rhetoric surrounding Vietnam in the early years of the war disadvantaged those groups who were the natural opponents of the War. Specifically, when pro-intervention rhetoric dominated elite discussion of the War

in the period from 1964 to 1967, the process of collecting opinion on Vietnam excluded a dovish segment of the population from collective opinion. However, as anti-intervention messages became more common in the public sphere and the Vietnam issue became less cognitively complex for those citizens with anti-intervention views, this bias receded. So while there may indeed have been a “silent majority” – as President Nixon maintained during the early years of his presidency – it was a group of citizens that opposed, rather than supported, the war.

All told, this book sounds a measured note of warning to those who seek to assess the voice of the people through surveys. The weaknesses of opinion polls are well known. As the critics of polls note, surveys do not do a very good job of conveying detailed information concerning the underlying intensity of responses. But opinion polls are typically hailed – by supporters and critics alike – as the most egalitarian of means of collecting the public’s view on the issues of the day. In this book, I argue that while opinion surveys may indeed be more egalitarian than other forms of participation, polls too may suffer from systematic inequalities of voice.

Opinion polls, then, like any measure of public preference, are imperfect. But this book is not an indictment of the survey enterprise, or of attempts to collect individuals’ opinions on the issues of the day. Instead, it is a call to estimate and account for biases that arise in the collection of public opinion. To measure the public’s will more accurately, we should pay closer attention to just what it is that we are measuring – the social and political context of an issue. And, we should think about how our measures could be affected by that context and account for such effects.

My aim here is not to end the polling enterprise; instead it is a call to pay close attention to the larger political and social context in which opinions are formed and expressed. By integrating our knowledge of the political and social forces at work in the larger world into an understanding of the individual-level question-answering process in this way, perhaps opinion polls may better serve the egalitarian purpose envisioned by scholars, pollsters and political elites.