

# The Mass Media and the Dynamics of American Racial Attitudes

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# Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface</i>	xiii
1 Toward a Dynamic Perspective on Racial Attitudes	I
2 Eras of Media Coverage of Race	13
3 Eras of Racial Liberalism and Conservatism	55
4 Media Framing and the Dynamics of Racial Policy Preferences	83
5 The Fusion of Race and the Welfare State in the Public Mind	106
6 A New American Dilemma for a New Millennium?	130
Appendix	142
<i>References</i>	147
<i>Index</i>	153

## List of Figures

2.1. Number of Stories on Race in <i>Newsweek</i> per year, 1950–1994	page 31
2.2. Mentions of Segregation in <i>Newsweek</i> , 1950–1994	36
2.3. Egalitarian Cues in <i>Newsweek</i> , 1950–1994	38
2.4. Individualism Cues in <i>Newsweek</i> , 1950–1994	42
2.5. Mentions of the Word “Ghetto” in <i>Newsweek</i> , 1950–1994	45
2.6. Mentions of Poverty in <i>Newsweek</i> , 1950–1994	50
3.1. Four Indicators of Racial Policy Preferences, 1970–1996	66
3.2. Racial Policy Preferences, 1950–1996	68
3.3. Black and White Preferences for Busing, 1972–1996 (Uniform Axis)	73
3.4. Black and White Preferences for Busing, 1972–1996 (Separate Axes)	73
3.5. Racial and Welfare-State Policy Preferences, 1966–1996	78
3.6. Racial and Welfare-State Policy Preferences, 1950–1965	79
3.7. Racial and Welfare-State Policy Preferences, 1950–1996	80
4.1. Egalitarian Media Cues and Racial Policy Preferences, 1950–1994	88
4.2. Individualist Media Framing and Racial Policy Preferences, 1950–1994	89
5.1. Racial and Welfare-State Policy Preferences, 1950–1996	108

5.2. Merged Public Opinion and Media Cues on “Black Poverty”: 1958–1994	116
5.3. Economic Equality and Public Opinion: An Alternative Causal Model	119
5.4. Economic Racial Equality, 1958–1994	122
5.5. Policy Liberalism and Public Opinion: An Alternative Causal Model	124

## List of Tables

2.1. Correlations between Types of Media Framing	<i>page</i> 52
3.1. Correlations of Indicators of Racial Policy Preferences with Overall Index	69
3.2. Correlations between White and Black Opinion Trends	74
3.3. Correlations between Year-to-Year Shifts in Racial and Welfare-State Policy Preferences for Various Time Periods	80
4.1. The Media and Public Opinion: Granger Test Results	92
4.2. The Media and Racial Policy Preferences: Preliminary Regression Analyses	93
4.3. A Multivariate Model of Racial Policy Preferences	101
5.1. The Media and the Relationship between Welfare-State and Racial Policy Preferences	117
5.2. Correlations of Indicators of Racial Equality with Overall Index	121
5.3. The Media and the Relationship between Welfare-State and Racial Policy Preferences: Controlling for Economic Equality	122
5.4. The Media and the Relationship between Welfare-State and Racial Policy Preferences: Controlling for Policy Liberalism	125

## Toward a Dynamic Perspective on Racial Attitudes

On the question of the social integration of the races our people draw the line. No decent and self-respecting Negro would ask for a law to force people to accept him where he is not wanted. They themselves do not want social intermingling. They are entitled to equality of opportunity, and they will get it through our efforts. But all the laws of Washington and all the bayonets of the army cannot force the Negro into our homes, our schools, our churches, and our places of recreation.

– Governor J. Strom Thurmond, D-SC, 1948 (quoted in Cohodas, 1993)

When I was governor, the laws said the races should be separated. But now the law is different, customs are different, public opinion has changed, and it's an entirely different situation.

– Senator J. Strom Thurmond, R-SC, 1978 (quoted in Cohodas, 1993)

The year is 1950. The place, the post-World War II South. Southern society is completely divided along racial lines. In fact, the notion that a single “southern society” even exists strains credibility. Instead, there are two southern societies – one white and one black. Black children and white children do not attend the same schools. Blacks and whites do not drink from the same water fountains or eat at the same restaurants. They do not buy groceries at the same stores. They do not participate in social or recreational activities together. Only a few short

years before, they did not even fight in the same units in the armed forces. They do not participate equally in the selection of the government officials who preside over both groups. Perhaps most ironically, though they worship the same God, cherish the same scriptures, and cling to the same cross, they do not attend the same churches.

These societal divisions were perfect reflections of American public opinion on race and civil rights, which had a distinctly segregationist, nonegalitarian flavor to it. Indeed, a 1942 survey revealed that only 41 percent of all Americans believed that black and white soldiers should serve together in the armed forces. Only 55 percent agreed that a black man could be just as good a soldier as a white man. Only 42 percent agreed that "Negroes are as intelligent as white people." The perceived differences between blacks and whites are hard to exaggerate, as only 36 percent believed that "Negro blood is the same as white blood." In addition to these strikingly prejudicial sentiments, the bulk of white Americans preferred to maintain distance between the races. Fifty-one percent claimed that streetcars and buses should be segregated. Fifty-five percent favored active job discrimination. Sixty-eight percent believed that white and black children should go to segregated schools. When it came to restaurants, 69 percent favored separate facilities, and fully 84 percent wanted segregated neighborhoods. This complex of attitudes existed in an atmosphere of denial that race was even a social problem worth addressing, as three Americans in five said that "Negroes are getting all the opportunities they deserve in this country."<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, southern society in 1950 was not so different from southern society in 1865. Eighty-five years after the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution ended slavery, things had not changed all that much for blacks in America. Blacks were still concentrated disproportionately in the South. There, blacks still tended to live in rural rather than urban areas. In absolute terms as well as in comparison to whites, blacks remained poor. In spite of the language of the Emancipation Proclamation, blacks were considered subhuman by most whites, and the society's laws and customs reflected this derision. Discrimination against blacks was more than tolerated; in many cases the law required

<sup>1</sup> These examples all come from surveys conducted between 1942 and 1946, and are reprinted in Cantril 1951.

it. For example, it was against the law in most southern states for blacks and whites to attend the same public schools and universities. In most places in the South, blacks were not allowed to participate in electoral politics. In nearly every case where the interests of blacks and whites came into conflict, the scales of justice were unfairly tilted in favor of whites. The testimony of blacks in court was typically discounted simply because whites controlled the justice system. Eighty years of freedom had not produced equality of any sort – not equality before the law, not economic equality, and, as the survey results just reported confirm, certainly not equality in the eyes of the American public. And eighty years of freedom had not even produced much movement toward those goals. Although slavery was gone, blacks were in almost every respect second-class citizens.

The year is 2000. Southern society is not as distinctive as it was a half-century ago. Many blacks have migrated to the northern cities in search of better-paying jobs. Many whites from the North have migrated to the South, and the formerly agrarian-dominated region is now one of the centers of America's economic growth. Beliefs about the innate inferiority of blacks are now dismissed as racist – witness the recent reaction to the controversial book *The Bell Curve*, which purported to show racial differences in intelligence but was quickly labeled pseudoscholarship thinly masking a racist political agenda. Public policy debates that focus on the role of blacks in society have evolved considerably; whereas in the past the debates revolved around whether discrimination *against* blacks should be allowed, the debate today centers on the question of whether discrimination *in favor of* blacks (in the form of affirmative-action policies) should be allowed. And it is not just the policy debates that have changed; government policies themselves have changed. The Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing statutes enacted in 1968 have given blacks the legal equality they formerly lacked. Legal segregation is a thing of the past, presumably never to return. The United States Supreme Court has made this clear in decision after decision. Laws and policies that discriminate on the basis of race are deemed “suspect” by the court and demand “strict scrutiny.” Laws that either explicitly or in effect forbid black political participation have given way to full black participation in the polity, and today blacks actually participate at higher rates than

whites, once socioeconomic status is controlled for.<sup>2</sup> Although blacks are still disproportionately poor compared to whites, the gap has narrowed. And the expansion of the welfare state has provided a safety net for blacks (as well as whites) who cannot yet achieve the American Dream on their own.

These shifts, unsurprisingly, have been accompanied by – or, in some cases, caused by – a sea change in American public opinion. The percentage of Americans favoring integrated schools rose from 32 percent in 1942 to 96 percent in 1995. The last time a pollster asked about segregated streetcars and buses, in 1970, fully 88 percent of Americans favored integration. The percentage of people favoring job discrimination has revealed a similarly dramatic movement: a 1972 survey showed that 97 percent preferred giving blacks an equal chance to get good jobs. Over the past half-century, clearly, a wave of egalitarian, antidiscriminatory sentiment – at least in principle – has swept over the American public.<sup>3</sup>

What happened in the last half-century that did not occur in the eighty or so years before that? To be sure, it is hard to exaggerate the profound change in American racial politics over the past fifty years, and this change is all the more remarkable given the equally profound lack of change over the previous eighty years. It is obvious that these societal shifts have occurred on several levels. The first level is that of public opinion. White society did not accept blacks as full partners in the American experiment in 1950, but at the turn of the millennium (with few exceptions) it does. In addition, the public's preferences have evolved with respect to the proper role of government in ensuring that blacks have access to the American Dream. Whereas whites formerly viewed government as a mechanism to insulate white society from blacks, today government is seen, at least in the minds of many, as a tool to protect minority interests from discrimination.

But perhaps the most significant change in American racial politics has occurred at the level of the national debate itself. In 1950,

<sup>2</sup> See Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1996. It is true that blacks vote less frequently than whites and donate less money to campaigns than whites, among other forms of participation. This masks the fact that these differences are more than completely accounted for by the different socioeconomic standings of blacks and whites today. For example, middle-income blacks are more likely to vote than middle-income whites.

<sup>3</sup> These examples are from Schuman et al. 1997.

American society was struggling with the concept of the innate worthiness of blacks. By the mid-1950s, with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision serving as the catalyst, the debate shifted to the issue of government actively discriminating against blacks by enforcing segregation. (Is “separate but equal” a good thing? Is it consistent with the Constitution? Can it be implemented?) In the 1960s, the debate shifted again, to the issue of governmental protection of blacks from discrimination in the private sector (such as public accommodations, employment, and housing). In the 1970s, the public discussion focused on the legitimacy of activist government policies like busing to end segregation in schools. And in the most recent period, debate has centered on the issue of affirmative-action policies that give preferences to blacks and other minorities in an effort to compensate for past discrimination or to ensure diversity in the workplace.

#### BLIND SPOTS: WHAT DON'T WE KNOW?

The scholarly literature on race in American politics is enormous, encompassing analyses that bridge such disciplines as economics, sociology, political science, public policy, and cultural studies. But the literature on race, vast though it is, has not produced much in the forms of theory or evidence on the role that the mass media have played in the evolution of race politics (or, more specifically, in public opinion) in the twentieth century. Our understanding of how the mainstream press has covered race – and especially how that coverage has evolved in anticipation of, in the middle of, and in the wake of the civil rights movement – is practically nonexistent. This despite the fact that nearly every scholar who has studied the politics of race would concede that the media have helped shape the course of race politics. On the face of it, few would deny that press coverage was critical to the unfolding civil rights drama of the 1950s and 1960s, for example. Most of the key events of the movement, after all – desegregation battles in Little Rock and elsewhere, bus boycotts, freedom rides – took place in communities that few non-southerners would have known about were it not for the national press. And yet the role played by the media in the unfolding drama of race in America has largely been ignored by scholars.

The literature on public opinion on race in America is similarly vast. Quite literally, decades of scholarly research have focused on the important question of why some Americans are racial liberals and others racial conservatives. Two leading theories have emerged, one focusing on the role played by overarching ideology, the other on the role of prejudice.<sup>4</sup> Scholars who have pursued the connection between ideology and racial attitudes have seen policy preferences on race, in the main, as a function of larger considerations about the proper role of government in American society. Citizens predisposed to believe that government cannot help solve society's problems will straightforwardly oppose governmental action in the case of race, whereas citizens who believe government can be an active part of the solution will tend to favor governmental action to level the playing field between white and black Americans.<sup>5</sup>

Another set of researchers has identified some form of racial prejudice (or the absence of it) as the leading factor that causes Americans to oppose or support liberal racial policies. These studies paint a very different picture of American public opinion, one that continues to be tainted with racial prejudice. In this view, when it comes to explaining why some Americans support or oppose liberal racial policies, ideological considerations are dwarfed by prejudice – and these ideological considerations are sometimes, in fact, merely convenient and “politically correct” covers for prejudice. Those individuals who harbor racial

<sup>4</sup> There are actually at least two other plausible explanations, though they are considerably less common in the academic literature. The first revolves around the concepts of group conflict and self-interest. The core idea here is that attitudes toward groups are a function of competition in the individual's environment and arise out of self-interest and a realistic conceptualization of intergroup conflict. This dates back at least to the political scientist V. O. Key (1949). For more recent examples, see Bobo 1983 and Giles and Evans 1986. Another theory, focusing around positions of social dominance, suggests that individuals in a dominant societal position seek to maintain that dominance; hence, whites will adopt policy views consistent with their historically dominant position over blacks in a social hierarchy. This is not a function of prejudice, but of a desire to maintain a position of power. See Sidanius et al. 2000 and the citations therein.

<sup>5</sup> The list of scholars endorsing this view is extensive. Most prominent among them, though, is the political scientist Paul Sniderman. See, for example, Sniderman and Carmines 1997; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sniderman et al. 1991; and Sniderman and Tetlock, 1986a, 1986b. Often, in this literature, the notion that ideology determines racial policy preferences comes across mainly by implication, as competing theories are dismissed as *not* causing racial policy attitudes. Ideology, then, tends to be the only explanation left standing.

prejudice overwhelmingly oppose liberal government policies on race, and those without prejudice tend to support those same policies.<sup>6</sup>

This debate is serious, substantive, and likely to rage on for years to come. The variation that these scholars seek to explain – why some individuals are racial liberals and other individuals are racial conservatives at a given point in time – represents something that is important to society. But the intense nature of the debate obscures the fact that variation *among different individuals* is not the only source of variation worth explaining. In our zeal to explain the differences between liberals and conservatives, another kind of variation has been almost completely ignored. For in addition to zeroing in on variation among individuals at one point in time, as this literature has exclusively done, scholars could also ask questions focusing on variation *over time*. As it stands, our understanding of public opinion on race is excessively static, wrongly assuming fixed attitudes that cannot and do not change.

As a scholarly community, we have very little sense of how, as a whole, American racial policy preferences have varied over time. Indeed, we have almost no sense of whether they have or have not varied at all. Has American public opinion become more liberal on matters of race? More conservative? Or has it moved in both conservative and liberal directions at different points in time? Do racial policy preferences in the aggregate, over time, move in roughly parallel fashion, with the public becoming more liberal (or conservative) on all facets of race policy simultaneously, or does each subissue in the domain of race politics have its own unique dynamics?<sup>7</sup> The scholarly community has no answers to these questions, largely because we have never asked them due to our preoccupation with individual-level variation.

In turn, we have little sense of the causal dynamics that underlie any over-time change. If American racial policy preferences have varied over time, why have they done so? What forces have made American opinion more liberal (or more conservative) on race? By focusing

<sup>6</sup> Prejudice is often referred to, in these studies, as “new racism,” or “symbolic racism,” or “racial resentment.” As with those focusing on ideology, the list of scholars emphasizing the role of prejudice in explaining racial attitudes is long. It is most closely identified, however, with Donald Kinder. See, for example, Kinder and Sanders 1996; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995; Sears 1988; Kinder 1986; Sears and Citrin 1985; Kluegel and Smith 1983; Kinder and Sears 1981; and Sears and Kinder 1971.

<sup>7</sup> Here I have in mind the famous articles published in *Scientific American* by Hyman and Sheatsley (1956; 1964). For more recent work in this vein, see Schuman et al. 1997.

exclusively on variation among individuals at one point in time, the scholarly community has neglected to identify and explain variation in the nation's racial policy preferences over time. And yet such variation is critical to understanding the ebbs and flows of race politics in America; indeed, given the centrality of race in American politics, we would not be exaggerating too much to say that identifying and explaining the over-time dynamics of racial attitudes would go a long way toward understanding all of American politics.

Here the two deficiencies of the literature on race in America – that it has neglected the role of the media and that it has been preoccupied with statics, not over-time dynamics – become related. The media's important role in shaping American racial politics can only be understood in a longitudinal framework. When we begin to appreciate this reality, we will find considerable power in explaining the over-time dynamics of American racial attitudes.

This book will make a connection that has been the source of a good deal of speculation, a great deal of polemic, but virtually no systematic analysis whatever – namely, the relationship between media coverage of race and American public opinion on race. In the process, the dynamic feature of racial politics in America will be emphasized. That is, the most interesting questions about race that have not been adequately addressed by the scholarly community revolve around how and why things today are (or are not) different than they were last year or ten years ago. Not surprisingly, then, the analyses in this book will have a distinctly time-series flavor. Given the focus on how and why racial politics has evolved over the last several decades, this is the most natural methodological approach. The end result will be a greater understanding of the sea change in racial politics that America has experienced over the last half-century.

The focus on over-time change will yield one other benefit as well. Although it is clear that both the national debates and public opinion have changed considerably over the past fifty years, we will also notice that most of these shifts have not been of the that-was-then-this-is-now variety. Indeed, despite the fact that the historical sketches that introduce this chapter show real change in race politics, our focus on time will prove that each of the years in between is an indispensable element of the story. Instead of viewing the changes as being akin to the differences between night and day, we will see that they are more

like shifts in the tide, which rolls in, then out, and then back in again, leaving the beach a bit different each time.

In a sense, this book represents a revival of the first studies that examined racial attitudes over time, a tradition begun in the 1950s by Herbert Hyman and Paul Sheatsley in their famous articles in *Scientific American*, and continued more recently by Howard Schuman and colleagues.<sup>8</sup> This volume, though, benefits from recent advances in the study of public opinion – to be described in detail in Chapter 3 – that enable us to extract information from numerous opinion surveys at once, thus making a unified analysis possible. Instead of taking each survey item about every racial issue as something unique, I will strive to find communality among the various subdomains of racial politics. This new approach will empower us to tie the trends in public opinion to systematic causes like the national media in previously undiscovered ways.

#### A MACRO PERSPECTIVE

How and why do Americans' attitudes about race change? The illustrations that introduce this chapter show unquestionable and massive change in the span of roughly fifty years or less. These attitudinal shifts are surely, to a degree, a function of generational replacement. As older generations that were socialized in an America in which blacks were considered to be inherently inferior begin to die off and are replaced by generations that witnessed the struggles of Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., and many others, surely the attitudes about the humanity of black people will change forever.

But how, if at all, do policy preferences about race change? It is worth noting that it has traditionally been assumed that such preferences do not change at all. In his famous 1964 treatise on public opinion, Philip Converse made the case that attitudes and policy preferences about race (along with attitudes about political parties) were the only stable and meaningful elements of a typical person's political "belief system." Perhaps because Converse's theory was so widely accepted, scholarly investigations into the shifts (and, implicitly, the causes of those shifts) in racial policy preferences have been rare. It has until

<sup>8</sup> See Hyman and Sheatsley 1956, 1964 and Schuman et al. 1997.

very recently been assumed that individuals' policy preferences on race were stable, even over the long run. Their attitudes on race, like their partisanship, were apparently a function of childhood socialization and education: they were the product of emotion, not cognition. Without trivializing the issue, one could say that the process by which a person acquires attitudes about race was, in many ways, seen as quite similar to the ways in which a person espouses a favorite baseball team. The process can essentially be boiled down to something not much more complicated than the fact of which team a person's parents rooted for.

But what if people do change their minds on race? What if the evolution of racial attitudes occur over the span of years and decades instead of over the course of generations? Perhaps still slow-moving, to be sure, and never to be confused with a fickle, moody public, what if there is evidence of shifts in racial policy preferences taking place at a rate that is too rapid to be accounted for by birth and death? What forces lead to such attitude change? And what does such change say about the politics of race in America, and indeed about American politics as a whole?

The answers, I believe, lie in the fact that Americans' attitudes about race are the product of their underlying political values – values that sometimes conflict with one another. Because different currents of the American ethos pull citizens in varying directions on the issue of race, with some core parts of their value system embracing government action while other parts simultaneously resist it, most Americans vacillate on the subject. That is, most of us see at least some truth in both sides of contemporary policy arguments about race policy. And, crucially, the American ethos is not a static, etched-in-stone body of ideas; it, too, is dynamic, with certain values becoming more prominent at some points in time, then, years or decades later, receding into the background, never eliminated from our consciousness but surely less prominent. In a sense, American attitudes on race resemble an internal tug-of-war between cherished values that conflict with one another – a struggle where one side gains ground over a period of time but the other side never truly loses, regaining strength and pulling back the other way.

But there is only one way to answer such questions definitively: go to survey marginals in search of stability and change in policy preferences on race. Once such shifts are discovered, we will need to generate entirely new theories of racial policy preferences, because the

cross-sectional literature is largely predicated on the assumption of individual stability. We will draw from recent advances in the study of public opinion that focus on internal ambivalence, and will require the development of theories of political learning and information acquisition that will reveal much about the nature of public opinion itself. And, once we see the evolution in racial attitudes over time, we will hunger for an explanation for the trends we have discovered. This is where the twin gaps in the literature on race in America – not sufficiently dynamic, no explicit role for the media – will require us to develop new dynamic theories of racial attitudes that incorporate the role of the mass media.

The longitudinal approach taken in this book will produce different types of questions – and therefore different types of answers – than does the more traditional approach. I am advocating a perspective that focuses instead on over-time change in aggregate sentiment on racial policy preferences. This different perspective will show how the portrait of racial attitudes in America today differs from the similar portrait of a year ago, a decade ago, or a half-century ago – and, if successful, it will explain *why* as well. As such, the analyses to follow will resemble a motion picture more than a snapshot.

#### THE PLAN OF THIS BOOK

In the next chapter, I describe the evolution of media coverage of race in America. There, I introduce a new data base, comprised of every story written on race in *Newsweek* magazine between 1950 and 1994, along with a supplementary sample of *New York Times* stories. This data base will allow for a comprehensive analysis of previously unanswered questions such as: How, in terms of quantity and tenor, is media coverage of race today different – and how is it similar to – such coverage in the past? Have certain themes been more prominent at some times than others? Is there a discernable pattern in why coverage shifts? Is it driven by savvy political actors who inject symbols into public debate for their own advantage, or by dramatic events in the real world, or by something else?

In Chapter 3, I describe recent developments in the study of public opinion and examine their implications for racial attitudes over time in the aggregate population. I ask the questions: Have racial policy

preferences shifted in an interpretable, understandable manner, or have they moved in a chaotic and inexplicable manner over the decades, or have they perhaps been stable and inmoving? Do racial policy preferences move through time in a coherent fashion? That is, are there liberal and conservative eras in racial policy preferences? Do periods of liberalism in American opinion on one racial issue coincide with liberal periods on other racial issues? Or does each racial issue represent a truly distinct dimension, with its own path and trajectory? Is there any coherence to public opinion on race? How does public opinion on race compare to public opinion on America's other enduring issue cluster of the twentieth century, the welfare state? The focus there will be entirely on public opinion in the domain of time – representing roughly the last half-century – on ebbs in a liberal direction and flows toward conservatism. This discussion will lead to a focus on shifts in the national dialogue on race as portrayed in the national media, and on political learning.

In Chapter 4, I combine theory and data, examine the time series of racial policy preferences in America, and build empirical models that describe the ebbs and flows of liberalism and conservatism in racial opinion. What forces drive aggregate sentiment on racial policy over time? Why is the American public sometimes liberal and sometimes conservative on race? The explanation will revolve around the complementary forces of media framing, economic cycles, feedback from the policy process, and generational change, all of which contribute to the changes in racial policy preferences. Chapter 5 then brings into focus a discovery from Chapter 3 about the relationship between opinion on race and opinion on the welfare state, and uses data on the media to describe how the two great issue domains in twentieth-century America – race and the welfare state – came to be associated with one another. How has that relationship evolved over time? What causal factors have influenced this relationship? What does this tell us about American politics?

In Chapter 6, I conclude with implications for democracy and the future of race politics in twenty-first-century America. Are the media manipulating public opinion? Can the national media be trusted to portray race in America accurately? To look elsewhere for culprits, if public opinion is shaped in the way I describe, can public opinion be trusted?