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Opinion Flows

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

POLICY PREFERENCES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

SO, WHAT'S NEW?

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

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

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

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

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

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

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