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James A. Stimson

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## Tides of Consent

### *How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*

Politics is a trial in which those in government – and those who aspire to serve – make proposals, debate alternatives, and pass laws. Then the jury of public opinion decides. It likes the proposals or actions or it does not. It trusts the actors or it doesn't. It moves, always at the margin, and then those who benefit from the movement are declared winners. This book is about that public opinion response. Its most basic premise is that although public opinion rarely matters in a democracy, public opinion change is the exception. Public opinion rarely matters, because the public rarely cares enough to act on its concerns or preferences. Change happens only when the threshold of normal public inattention is crossed. When public opinion changes, governments rise or fall, elections are won or lost, and old realities give way to new demands.

James A. Stimson is the Raymond Dawson Distinguished Bicentennial Professor of Political Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He is a former president of the Midwest Political Science Association and treasurer of the American Political Science Association. He has authored and coauthored numerous books, including *Yeas and Nays: Normal Decision-Making in the U.S. House of Representatives*, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Reconstruction of American Politics*, *Public Opinion in America*, and *The Macro Polity*. Professor Stimson has served as editor of *Political Analysis* and has served on the editorial boards of journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science* and the *Journal of Politics*. He is the author of many articles published in major journals of political science and is the recipient of various awards for his distinguished scholarship.

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# Tides of Consent

*How Public Opinion Shapes  
American Politics*

JAMES A. STIMSON

*University of North Carolina*



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*To Bill Flanigan, Frank Sorauf, Don Matthews, and Ray Dawson.*

*In recognition of old debts, never repaid.*

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## Preface

### *The Shutdown*

Bill Clinton was repudiated. The 1994 congressional elections, a triumph for the Republicans and their “Contract with America,” left newly elevated House Speaker Newt Gingrich in charge, proclaiming the president of the United States “irrelevant.” What ensued, in two stages, was a rare attempt at congressional government, at setting the public agenda from Capitol Hill. The first stage was the “contract,” a series of carefully staged votes in the first 100 days of the new Congress. Nine of ten items passed, some surprisingly easily, although the Republican Senate, less enthusiastic by far, was slow to follow up and Bill Clinton stood ready to veto most of what did get Senate approval.

The second stage, unlike the first, was not raised for public debate during the elections. It was an attempt to alter fundamentally the shape of the federal budget. With the enthusiasm born of being newly in control, Gingrich and the Republicans set out to achieve the goal that had always eluded Republicans, that had eluded even Ronald Reagan: to cut down on scale of government in the domestic sphere.<sup>1</sup> They would pass a budget that would zero out spending programs (for example, the Corporation for Public Broadcasting) and that would actually reduce spending across the board for health care, education, environment, and welfare. Cutting welfare was popular, had always been. But when Gingrich opined that orphanages weren’t such a bad way to deal with dependent children, the public was reminded that welfare cuts might not be costless.

<sup>1</sup> Reagan, in 1981, had succeeded in cutting the growth of domestic spending, reining in increases, but had not achieved actual cuts. In later budgets he could not even slow the momentum.

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But for this crucial second stage there was a problem: The president was not in fact irrelevant. No spending bill could become law without his signature or a two-thirds' vote to override his veto. He predictably would not sign. And the bills, as if stamped "Made by the Republican Party," had no chance of achieving the Democratic votes that would be required for override. The well-worn path for such deadlocks is compromise. When either side can block but neither can pass its preferences into law, meeting somewhere close to the middle is the winning solution that emerges. But the election had been billed a "Republican Revolution," and its winners, believing the wind of public support was at their backs, were thinking like revolutionaries. And so they decided to gamble. Gingrich announced early in the process that there would be no compromise, that the Republican Congress would write a Republican budget and send it to the president with two choices: Sign it or shut down the government when the fiscal year expired with no budget.

The Congress, after passing almost all of the "contract" items in the first 100 days, as promised, was popular as never before. Gingrich promised, Gingrich delivered, and Speaker Gingrich was in the driver's seat. Congress, never popular with the American public, was drawing an approval of 47 percent. With the public behind him and an unpopular president with a history of backing down when challenged, this aggressive strategy seemed as though it could work. The mechanism to implement Gingrich's plan was simple. Not passing the budget before the beginning of the fiscal year was far from unusual; in more years than not some of the appropriations were not yet law with the onset of the new budget year. Congress historically has coped with such situations by using "continuing resolutions," a device that allowed the government to continue operating as it did under the expired budget. This time there would be no continuing resolution.<sup>2</sup> President Clinton could sign on to the Republican plan or watch government halt, waiting until the cumulated injury and inconvenience forced him to capitulate.

Public opinion would arbitrate the conflict. If Clinton showed reluctance to accommodate, then an angry electorate would push him to do so. That was the operating theory in April and May when the strategy was put into place. The public, however, thought it was a bluff, that

<sup>2</sup> The Republican Congress actually did pass continuing resolutions (several in the end), one to put off the deadlock until mid-November and then another with "poison pill" provisions that were calculated to force a presidential veto, a shrewd tactic designed to make the presidential action appear to precipitate the crisis. It did not help the Republican cause that one of those poison pills was a very unpopular increase in Medicare premiums.

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the showdown would not come to pass. By 77 percent and 79 percent, respectively, NBC News and *Wall Street Journal* polls of September and October predicted that the budget would be resolved somehow without a shutdown. Threatening dire consequences is a fairly normal part of hard bargaining. It had been done before. But Gingrich and the Republicans might have been made nervous by an October poll that showed that more Americans would blame Congress (43 %) than the president (32 %) if the shutdown did come to pass. Since the heady days of spring, Congress had gone beyond the popular “contract” items into new territory, such as defunding public television and threatening many popular domestic programs. The “contract” had been billed as “reform.” The steps beyond, far less popular, were attacks on programs and values that enjoyed wide public support. While Congress was losing public esteem, the president gained a little, moving from approval in the mid-40s during Gingrich’s first 100 days to low 50s by the time of the showdown in November. Perhaps a more popular president facing a less popular Congress might not back down after all.

The media, like the public, generally regarded the shutdown as a political bluff. Stories of the dislocations to come emphasized the inessential, cosmetic side of government. Families vacationing in the capital might not be able to visit some national monuments, perhaps not see the wildlife in Western parks. There was no sense of crisis, that anything that really mattered might be seriously affected.

That was not to be the case. When the government actually shut down, partial though the shutdown was, the effects were anything but cosmetic. About 800,000 federal employees were forced to stay home without pay.<sup>3</sup> “Bureaucrats” have never been popular, but these people turned out to be just ordinary people who worked for a living and had mortgages to pay. Hundreds of employers who performed a myriad of contractual services for government and the public immediately shut down and laid off their workers. Much of the government, we quickly learned, was not really government. It was private firms paid by government serving government needs. Unlike the federal employees, where one could at least imagine that an eventual settlement might compensate lost pay, the private sector employees furloughed by the shutdown were innocent victims for whom there would be no compensation. The shutdown was not just

<sup>3</sup> White House staffers were among those furloughed. Interns were called on to cover staff functions. That brought the president together with one Monica Lewinsky, the result of which is history.

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about aborted vacation plans; it was about lives disrupted. A Gallup survey soon after the onset captured a concerned public. Asked whether the partial shutdown was a serious problem, 51 percent said that it was a crisis or a serious problem. Only 14 percent said it was not a problem. People who thought government played little role in their daily lives discovered by the shock of its absence that it did. And the dimensions were more than personal. Wall Street and the financial community were distressed to learn that the thousands of people who labored to collect economic statistics, the raw numbers that are the basis for all planning and forecasting of economic trends, were off the job, not collecting the data. The numbers would still flow, but the lost work days put into question whether they could be believed.

If Republicans were troubled by early polls that speculated on who might be blamed, after the shutdown began came polls that were no longer speculations. The public was much more inclined to blame “Republican leaders in Congress” (49%) than the president (26%), with another 20 percent or so condemning both equally. All of a sudden it was becoming clear that the pressure to compromise would not be on Clinton alone. The shutdown wasn’t a mere bargaining game. The public was angry, and someone was going to pay in lost political standing. Public inattention to politics is legendary. But 80 percent of all Americans reported paying close attention to the shutdown in a January survey by Pew. It was a crisis. It would have consequences.

The consequences were felt in Congress. From the April high point of 47 percent, congressional approval had fallen steadily, not just back to its normal level of about 36 percent, but below that, down to the low 20s during the November shutdown. “Approval of Congress” is something that leaders feel very directly; its import is that it mirrors their own personal standing and, with the Congress so clearly identified with one party, the party’s standing too. Meanwhile, Bill Clinton’s public standing improved. The crisis perhaps did not benefit the president; it clearly did not hurt him. The pressure to settle now shifted. Clinton looked as if he could hold out indefinitely. The Republican congressional leadership could not.

More than others, Bob Dole, Senate majority leader and candidate to oppose Bill Clinton in 1996 for the presidency, was feeling the heat. Early soundings suggested that the shutdown was harming Republican prospects for 1996 and was tying Dole in the public mind to an increasingly unpopular Gingrich. Republicans relented and came to terms on a temporary deal to keep the government operating another month.

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When the government shut down again in mid-December, there was no longer any suspense about who was winning and losing the tug of war. Dole's presidential campaign had suffered damage from which it would not recover. Clinton was hanging tough for the first time in his presidency and enjoying public support for doing so. As the pain of public rejection began to be felt, Republican unity began to fold. Dole's Senate Republicans began working a deal with the White House amid talk of sell-out from the House freshmen, who saw their balanced budget plan and the shutdown as a historic mission.

The Republicans had wanted to wage a war of principle over balancing the federal budget in seven years.<sup>4</sup> Their plan proposed some hard and serious medicine, severe cuts to the Medicare and Medicaid programs whose rapid growth had much to do with the budget numbers. The weakness in their bargaining position was that the money saved on the popular health programs was about the same amount as their proposed new tax cut. It was not painful medicine for balancing the budget, it was seen as painful medicine to finance a tax cut, sacrificing the poor and the elderly for a break to high-income taxpayers. That was not a winnable position.

With Dole moving toward settlement and the House freshmen out ahead of Gingrich girding for combat, the *New York Times's* headline of January 5, 1996, captured the feeling: "Battle over the Budget: The Republicans; Split and Bruised in Polls, G.O.P. Weighs New Tactics." Now it was a salvage operation. The nation had decided. The Republicans had lost their high-stakes bid. When they passed yet another continuing resolution in January, the extension was still temporary, and there was talk of yet another shutdown to come. But the talk was face-saving. There would not be another shutdown. The Republican Congress had fallen so far so fast that instead of further conflict with Bill Clinton, Republican leadership in both houses began looking for Clinton measures they might pass before the election in order to repair their image of uncompromising revolutionaries.

This story, and many like it, shows the dominating role of opinion movements. The game in Washington is played to win the game in the country. The issue is not the "polls," a term by which we disparage public opinion. The polls are measuring devices. It is not the numbers; it is what

<sup>4</sup> The irony in this story is striking. Having staked all on a plan to balance the budget in seven years (by fiscal 2002), a plan thought at the time to be too ambitious to succeed, the surging economy of the 1990s (and the 1993 increased tax rates) did in three years what the lost plan could not do in seven.

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they mean. It is the real movements by the national electorate that the polls measure that move politics.

Public opinion matters. It moves in meaningful ways, the players in Washington attend closely, and the public governs, much more than most realize. Its power is the inertia. Once in motion, it can no more be reversed than can the tides be halted. Something sets it in motion and it creeps, as the tides come in, steadily toward a new position. Its power is that it points always to the future, telling those whose careers and strategies depend on public support that success depends on being with the tide, not against it.

It is probably impossible to say what single thing is the most important factor in American politics, but I believe that thing is public opinion movement. I believe that it is the drive wheel. And important though it is, we have only scratched the surface of understanding opinion movement. It is almost unknown in a systematic sense, in a sense of regular theories and analyses. But commentary about opinion movement is ubiquitous. Take away the sense that opinion is shifting and the thoughts of many political analysts would lose their motivating force.

Tracing movements and showing consequences is the central theme of this book. Its claim is that change over time is what moves politics. Its design is to look at change over time in many different facets of public preferences, behavior, and response. It looks at movements on a time scale as fine as day to day and at movements that run a decade to completion. It is a story of American politics that will seem familiar in many regards, but one that puts the public in the driver's seat of politics, a common view of how democracy should be, a quite uncommon view of how it is.

Elections matter ultimately, because they force politicians to worry about the future, to attend to the present with a very sharp eye. But most of the effects that matter don't happen in elections. Politics is fast moving; it can't wait for a referendum scheduled months or years in the future. Our view of a gentle, slow-moving sequence in which citizens form opinions, express them at the polls, and then get a response from government – a product of political theory more than observation – doesn't come to terms with highly ambitious players in the political game, players who understand that they must anticipate where movement is heading before it gets there, that they must act now because later is too late.

But this isn't public opinion as commonly understood, that is, which percent favors or opposes some proposal, approves or disapproves of the president. *It is movement that matters.* Politicians ask, "How will the public

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respond?” and watch change for the answer. We have long known and noted a disconnect between many of the things citizens say they want and what government does. This static opinion is often toothless. When politicians know that the important public consensus is on lack of real concern about an issue, then the fact that what government does violates what citizens say they want will occur routinely. What citizens really want in these cases is not to pay attention, not to have concern about government intrusion into their lives. And that they get.

But opinion movement is a different story altogether. When public opinion changes, then the slumbering bear is alive; something has wakened it and it is wise to watch where it will go and what it will do. *Change happens when people care*. When people care, it is most unwise to stand against it. It is one of the tougher tricks in politics to know when the public does not care, when its apparent view can be ignored because it doesn't want to be bothered, and when it is aroused, in which case the rules change.

Movement in opinion often seems jerky and incoherent. Support for some positions goes up by a point or two, back down a little, up again, and so on. That is only on the surface. When we get beneath it to the public itself, not just the samples of it, it is a smooth path from here to there like that of a giant ship, not jerky like a kite. We don't often see that, because it requires a large amount of data and a belief in the smoothness to go after it. But that is what matters and that is what we see in this book.

## ON POINT OF VIEW

This view is contrary to most (but not all) of what is written about public opinion in scholarly studies, contrary to a thirty-second-ad approach to politics, contrary to much that is reported as news. Coming to terms with the contradictions requires thinking about individuals and aggregates and requires looking at a lot of evidence. That is what this book is all about.

We have begun, in recent years, to think about public opinion in the aggregate – whole electorates rather than individuals. And we have begun to think about how those aggregates move over time. This new science of public opinion is almost wholly different from everything that went before. It differs decisively in finding order and pattern in how electorates respond to politics. Some of this new work is my own. It allows me to tell a story about how ordinary people engage in politics.

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Much of that story is already written, although some is new. It fills scholarly journals with equations and analyses. But one of the beauties of this style of thinking is that it appeals to the native good sense of ordinary readers. It does not need equations. Its analyses can be expressed in simple English. My intention here is nothing less than to write a complete story of public opinion and to write it for readers who may know a little about politics but nothing about equations and regressions, nothing about the jargon of public opinion research.

## ON HOW THE BOOK CAME TO BE WRITTEN

From the late 1980s I have been working on opinion dynamics, exploring how opinions move in the aggregate over time, why, and with what consequence for politics. From the beginning it was clear that these topics are of interest to people who care about politics and public affairs. Unlike most work on public opinion, which focuses on individual psychology and has no direct application to practical politics, opinion movement immediately strikes most people as exactly what they want to know to understand politics. In a word, it is intuitive.

In my first book on the topic, *Public Opinion in America* (Stimson 1991), I was torn between two writing goals: telling a story for general readers about how opinions move politics in America and convincing the scholarly community that the theory, concepts, and technology I had developed had a place in understanding public opinion. Ultimately, I concluded that no compromise was possible, that the book had to be either one or the other but could not be both. I chose to write a scholarly book, introducing the concept of public mood and the technology for estimating it. (This is some of the materials of Chapters 2 and 3.) The book was successful, but I was disappointed that the heavy-duty scholarship made it inaccessible to all but public opinion professionals. So, part of this book is a return to that lost goal, writing about what we know about public opinion movement for an audience that cares about politics.

During election year 2000 I decided on an effort, half work and half play, to track the presidential campaign on a daily basis. I wanted to study the campaign, and particularly the horse-race polling, as it happened, day by day. I wanted to see freshly what happened and what mattered, without the prejudice of looking back and knowing how it turned out. The technology that I had developed allowed me to take all the polls, as they were published, and solve for the standing of the candidates. This was an improvement over the public debate on polls, which observed that



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they differed a bit and argued, endlessly, about which of them should be believed. Using all of them is undeniably better than any one.<sup>5</sup> I posted my daily estimates to a Web site just for the fun of it. Trying to figure out what it all meant while it was going on led me to conclude that we don't know much at all about presidential campaign dynamics. That is the origin of the analyses of Chapter 4.

Earlier that year I had conducted a graduate seminar at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill on the topic of macro theory and research. It was a wonderful experience (and not all seminars are) and left me impressed both with how much we had learned in a brief time and with how little of this knowledge was working its way back inside the Beltway, where politics is practiced. My own research program at the time is now published (Erikson, MacKuen, and Stimson 2002) and many of those student papers are making their way into scholarly journals. Among the set of graduate student papers, three of them left an imprint on my Chapter 5. These were works on "Trust in Government" (Luke Keele), approval of Congress (Adam Newmark), and U.S. Senator approval (Jennifer Anderson).<sup>6</sup>

These influences come together in this book. Most important is my desire to take what we know and make it accessible, without the tedious detail that haunts survey research and without the jargon and technology of the dynamics approach. My thought when I began to observe opinion movements was that this was just what my intuition had always said public opinion should be. I hope readers will see it as I do.

## ON TRUTH, OBJECTIVITY, AND SPIN

Much writing about public opinion is adversarial. It takes a view, from left or right, and proceeds to construct a set of facts that supports the view. It is spin. That kind of thing, call it rhetoric, is how politics works. It is part of the process.

There is nothing wrong with that, except that once you have figured out the perspective, it becomes predictable, and what is predictable is

<sup>5</sup> Because news organizations commission polls (thank goodness), they naturally report on their own product. The effect of this is that on a typical day, five organizations might be writing stories about their tracking polls of 800 respondents, each of which has a *lot* of sampling fluctuation. The total of all five is like a sample of 4,000, very reliable. Because no one owns it, this much better estimate goes unreported.

<sup>6</sup> The Anderson and Newmark research was later combined and published (Anderson and Newmark 2002).

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boring. Telling the story objectively, just trying to get it right, is much more challenging. Objectivity of all kinds is difficult. In politics it is more difficult still. But the reward is great. It promises to convey truth, the real thing, not truths that can all be set aside by dismissing the prejudices that produced the perspective.

Critics of this more scientific approach to knowledge tell us that objectivity is impossible. And they are correct; it is. But the goal of objectivity is not. And if it is unobtainable, that does not make it less worthy. What I can say about the views I bring to understanding public opinion is that objective truth is my goal. Objectivity is the standard by which I wish to be judged. And when I fall short of meeting the standard, it is from my limitations of knowledge and vision, not from intent.

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