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Introduction: The fragmented state of opinion research

This book is an extended argument about how people form political preferences. It seeks to show how news and political arguments diffuse through large populations, how individuals evaluate this information in light of their political values and other predispositions, and how they convert their reactions into attitude reports on mass surveys and vote decisions in elections.

The argument of the book applies to a very wide range of problems in mass political behavior – among them, racial and political tolerance, support for American involvement in overseas wars, voting in presidential and congressional elections and in presidential primaries, presidential popularity, trust in government, and judgments about the economy.

The dynamic element in the argument – the moving part, so to speak – is coverage of public affairs information in the mass media. This coverage may consist of ostensibly objective news reports, partisan argumentation, televised news conferences, or even paid advertisements, as in election campaigns. What matters for the formation of mass opinion is the relative balance and overall amount of media attention to contending political positions.

Although the book deals with the formation of political preferences in numerous cases, it maintains a high level of generality. The aim is to integrate as much as possible of the dynamics of public opinion within a cohesive theoretical system.

The ideas necessary to accomplish this integration are few and surprisingly simple. The first is that citizens vary in their habitual attention to politics and hence in their exposure to political information and argumentation in the media. The second is that people are able to react critically to the arguments they encounter only to the extent that they are knowledgeable about political affairs. The third is that citizens do not typically carry around in their heads fixed attitudes on every issue on which a pollster may happen to inquire; rather, they construct “opinion statements” on the fly as they confront each new issue. The fourth is that, in constructing their opinion statements, people make greatest use of ideas that are, for one reason or another, most immediately salient to them – at the “top of the head,” to use the phrase of Taylor and Fiske (1978).

Once these basic notions have been appropriately organized and to a limited extent formalized, the need for numerous domain-specific theories and conventional distinctions in the political behavior field disappears, even distinctions
between vote choices and choices between opposing response options on questionnaires. Each “domain” can be treated as simply another context in which citizens formulate responses on the basis of the ideas that have reached them and been found acceptable. Several major methodological issues, as well as discussions concerning the nature of mass belief systems, can also be fruitfully accommodated within the model.

Efforts at integration of research findings are uncommon in the public opinion field. With only a handful of exceptions, the trend is in the other direction—toward the multiplication of domain-specific concepts and distinctions. Thus, analysts largely explain voting in presidential elections separately from voting in congressional elections, racial tolerance separately from political tolerance, foreign policy attitudes separately from all other attitudes, and so on. Certain general topics, such as political attitude change, are typically addressed only in the context of particular substantive topics, such as “agenda setting” or presidential popularity, so that there is presently little general literature on attitude change within the public opinion field. But other general topics, such as the nature of political attitudes, are typically addressed only in specialized literatures.

The result of all this specialization is that the public opinion field has devolved into a collection of insular subliteratures that rarely communicate with one another. Hence, we know much more about the details of particular dependent variables than we do about theoretical mechanisms that span multiple research domains.

Despite this, the potential for theoretical integration is great. Two types of individual-level variables, political awareness and political values, are important across a wide range of situations and, as I seek to show in this book, have essentially the same effects across domains. Mass opinion change, as will become apparent, seems to conform to the same principles in whatever context it occurs. The sketchy evidence that exists suggests that elite discourse has much the same effects on public opinion across a broad range of topics. And finally, the process by which people choose between opposing policy prescriptions appears quite similar to how they choose between candidates. There seems, thus, to be no strong justification for the current practice of organizing nearly all public opinion research around particular dependent variables, and this book is a deliberate attempt to break with this practice.

All scientific theories, as William James observed, tend to leak about the joints. Mine will be no exception. In particular, the breadth and generality for which I aim in this book have been achieved at the expense of strong assumptions and some important simplifications. There has been little choice about this. Any study of public opinion, or any other large-scale social phenomenon, that took seriously every plausible avenue of influence and every proposed conceptual distinction would be able to provide little more than descriptive accounts of the phenomena of interest. Broad social theory and strong results require strong assumptions and significant simplifications, and it is foolish to pretend otherwise.
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This methodological posture will suit the tastes of some readers, but it will make others uneasy. To those who find my approach dubious, I can say two things: First, that the public opinion field is long overdue for an attempt to sketch a unified theory of its major empirical regularities, and without some license to make assumptions and simplifications, no such theory is possible. And second, that I will not disguise my simplifications but will, on the contrary, both highlight them by bald statement and make clear why they may be questioned. To avoid confusion and the appearance of constant waffling, I will not always criticize my argument in the same paragraphs in which I make it, but will instead save most of my self-criticism for a later chapter. But the self-criticism will be there. The skeptical reader, having weighed it, can then decide whether my results have been worth their price.

In attempting to state my arguments as clearly and generally as possible, I make limited use of formal and statistical modeling. Despite this, the book is no more technical than many studies of public opinion and much less technical than some. The taste and limited technical abilities of the author are the main reason for this. In only one chapter (Chapter 9) is it important for the reader to follow extensive mathematical arguments, and even there it is possible to skip the math without missing the central points of the chapter.

A preliminary word on the disciplinary orientation of the book will perhaps also be useful to readers. The book, as indicated, is primarily concerned with how individuals convert political information and argumentation into political opinions. As such, it is essentially a study in political psychology. As will become apparent, the book also draws heavily on ideas and evidence that have been developed by psychologists. Nevertheless, the book is closer to the discipline of political science than to psychology. A superficial indication of this is that the book avoids technical psychological terms and tends instead to favor terms from the language of everyday politics. Thus, the primitive term in my model of how citizens organize political information in their minds will not be “schema” but “consideration.” A more important indication of disciplinary orientation is that, in contrast to some psychological studies of politics, this book pays vastly more attention to the social sources of mass attitudes – in particular, the availability of information in elite discourse – than to the largely autonomous operation of people’s minds and psyches on the world as they perceive it. Finally, and most importantly, the book limits itself to ideas that can be readily tested in typical public opinion surveys. I leave those phenomena that can be effectively demonstrated only in psychological laboratories – even those phenomena that undeniably exist and have consequences outside the laboratory – to researchers in other disciplines.1 Thus, experimental psychologists, in particular, should be warned that my arguments may be simpler, even

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1 This orientation does not rule out the conduct of experiments, provided they can be conducted in a typical survey setting. Nor does it rule out ideas that originate in psychological laboratories and do have testable implications for mass surveys, such as McGuire’s (1969) theory of attitude change.
radically simpler, than they may feel is warranted by the type of data available to them.

To put the matter somewhat differently, I, as an analyst of public opinion, am not concerned with developing models that approximate as closely as possible the intricacies of human information processing. Rather, I am concerned with capturing, with as little extraneous theoretical apparatus as possible, those aspects of information processing that have demonstrable relevance for understanding the dynamics of public opinion on major issues, as public opinion on major issues is typically measured.

Inasmuch as the book is centrally concerned with how citizens use information from the mass media to form political preferences, it also substantially overlaps core concerns of the field of mass communication. If mass communications is broadly defined, as it often is, to include concern with the nature of public opinion, the overlap is even greater. I am not, however, aware of any important difference between my general approach to these concerns and the approaches taken in the communication field.

One consequence of the stress on generality in this book is that its organization is somewhat unusual. Rather than having a chapter on each of several substantive domains — foreign policy attitudes, domestic policy attitudes, presidential elections, congressional elections, and so forth — the book is organized around more general theoretical matters: how people answer survey questions, how attitude change occurs, the effects of opposing mass communications of unequal intensities, and so forth.

This mode of organization turns out to have an enormous practical advantage. Quite different kinds of data have been collected in different substantive domains, some of which provide leverage on questions that are unanswerable from data that are, or are likely to be, available from other domains. Data from the 1978 congressional election are particularly valuable to this book because they contain identical and highly detailed measures of attitudes that have been formed across several dozen separate political campaigns. Once it has become clear how choosing between candidates on a ballot is like choosing between response options on a typical attitude survey, these congressional data become extremely useful for illustrating the dynamics of preference formation in general.

The argument of the book develops as follows: Chapters 2 and 3 introduce the principal theoretical concepts of the book and a simple model based on them. The remainder of the book is then concerned with drawing out the deductive implications of this model and testing them against the available data.

Chapters 4 and 5 deal with the nature of political attitudes — or more precisely, how individuals convert the ideas in their heads to answers to closed-ended survey questions. Chapter 6 turns to the substantive content of people’s attitudes, showing how elite opinion leadership, individuals’ level of attentiveness to elite cues, and differences in individual political values interact to affect opinion statements. Chapter 6, however, deals only with static distributions of opinion, such as can be observed in typical, one-shot opinion surveys. Chapters
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7 through 10 shift the focus to attitude change by developing a dynamic formulation of the argument used in Chapter 6. A source of possible difficulty in these chapters is that they conduct tests in many different issue domains, skipping from one topic to another (from race to presidential popularity to judgments of the performance of the national economy to support for the Korean War) in order to take full advantage of the limited amount of pertinent data. In consequence, this part of the book may seem somewhat disjointed. However, the chapters have, I hope, a compensating theoretical unity, as they test increasingly complex ideas on how the public responds to competing communications of unequal intensities or “loudness.” The fullest tests of the model appear in Chapters 9 and 10. Chapter 9 analyzes the evolution of mass attitudes on the Vietnam War over the period 1964 to 1970, and Chapter 10 examines the formation of candidate preferences in contested elections (presidential, Senate, House, and presidential primary). Although the two types of cases seem quite different, the dynamics of attitude formation and change in each seem to be exactly the same.

Following the presentation of the core arguments of the book in Chapters 2 through 10, I present what are, in effect, two concluding chapters. The first evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of the model developed in the body of the book, suggests some corrections and extensions, and illustrates the form that future theorizing might take. The second of the concluding chapters is an epilogue that stands somewhat apart from the rest of the book. It shows how elements of the system of political information in the United States are linked to the model of attitude formation sketched in the earlier part of the book.

Finally, I should add a word about my data sources. All of the original empirical analyses in this book are based on data that are available through the Inter-university Consortium for Social and Political Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. In presenting my results, I have done my best to make clear how I have used these data so that interested scholars can double-check them.

The most commonly used datasets are the election studies conducted under the auspices of the Center for Political Studies (CPS) at the University of Michigan and, within the last several years, the Board of Overseers of the National Election Studies (NES). I have made particularly heavy use of the 1986 NES election survey and the 1987 NES pilot study, which reinterviewed some 450 of the 1986 respondents. By luck, the 1986–7 study captured two of the most interesting cases of attitude change I have been able to find; by design, it also carried an extensive investigation of the microfoundations of political attitudes, including one, evaluations of President Reagan’s job performance, that was undergoing rapid change. Without the 1987 pilot study, this book would have had significantly weaker empirical foundations. Altogether, I make use of twenty-three CPS/NES datasets, plus a twenty-fourth (concerning attitudes in Brazil) that is archived with ICPSR.
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Information, predispositions, and opinion

Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it. The central aim of this book is to show how, across a very wide range of issues, variations in the information carried in elite discourse, individual differences in attention to this information, and individual differences in political values and other predispositions jointly determine the contours of public opinion. The book, thus, is most crucially about the relationship among information, predispositions, and opinion.

The present chapter introduces and defines these key terms, examines some critical problems associated with their study, and shows in a preliminary way how they relate to one another. In so doing, it develops the intuitions behind the more technical core of the book, which begins in Chapter 3.

INFORMATION AND ELITE DISCOURSE

To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live. As Walter Lippmann wrote in his classic treatise, *Public Opinion* (1922/1946),

Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth’s surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect. . . . Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine. (p. 59)

The “others” on whom we depend, directly or indirectly, for information about the world are, for the most part, persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs – which is to say, political elites. These elites include politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists. Even when we learn from friends or family members about some aspect of public affairs, often we may still be secondhand consumers of ideas that originated more distantly among some type of elite.
The information that reaches the public is never a full record of important events and developments in the world. It is, rather, a highly selective and stereotyped view of what has taken place. It could hardly be otherwise. But even if it could, the public would have little desire to be kept closely informed about the vast world beyond its personal experience. It requires news presentations that are short, simple, and highly thematic – in a word, stereotyped. Thus, Doris Graber (1984), in a close study of how a sample of citizens monitored the news, found that her subjects “grumbled frequently about the oversimplified treatment of [television] news . . . ” Yet when special new programs and newspaper features presented a small opportunity for more extensive exposure to issues, they were unwilling to seize it. For the most part, [citizens] would not read and study carefully the more extensive versions of election and other news in newspapers and news magazines. Masses of specific facts and statistics were uniformly characterized as dull, confusing, and unduly detailed. . . . (p. 105)

Lippmann, who remains perhaps the most insightful analyst of the process by which the public comes to form an understanding of complex and distant events, devoted a large section of Public Opinion to news stereotypes, or what today are more often called frames of reference. In one lucid passage, he described World War I as it would probably have been perceived by a character in Sinclair Lewis’s Main Street:

Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefront. Pictures of France and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them, and professionals do not try. They think of them as, say, two hundred divisions. But Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were engaged in a personal duel. Perhaps if you could see what she sees with her mind’s eye, the image in its composition might be not unlike an Eighteenth Century engraving of a great soldier. He stands there boldly unruffled and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind. (p. 8)

As suggested by Miss Sherwin’s reliance on an eighteenth-century engraving, Lippmann doubted that individuals can personally create the stereotypes and other symbolic representations – “the pictures in our heads” – by which remote and even proximate events are understood. Rather,

[j]n the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture. (p. 61)

Many of the stereotypes to which Lippmann refers are permanent features of the culture – the corrupt politician, the labor strike, the election contest, the yeoman farmer. But because society is always churning up new issues and problems, many stereotypes are recent creations. For example, research has shown how, in the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment, stereotypes of uni-sex toilets and women combat troops came into being as a reflection of the
organizational and ideological needs of the contending activists (Mansbridge, 1986). Luker has done similar research on the origins of the Pro-Choice and Pro-Life labels in the contrasting world views of abortion activists (Luker, 1984). A powerful stereotype that has emerged in recent years is that of “the homeless.” Stereotypes and frames like these are important to the process by which the public keeps informed because they determine what the public thinks it is becoming informed about, which in turn often determines how people take sides on political issues (Edelman, 1964; Bennett, 1980; Gamson and Modigliani, 1987; Kinder and Sanders, 1990).

Although culturally given and elite-supplied stereotypes may be most powerful in shaping public understanding of events that are “out of reach, out of sight, out of mind” (Lippmann, 1922/1946, p. 21), they can be important even for matters within people’s powers of direct observation. For example, Iyengar (1991) has used experimental evidence to argue that whether television news focuses on “episodic” cases of individual poverty, or the societywide conditions that cause poverty, affects the public’s attribution of blame for poverty and thereby its willingness to support programs aimed at alleviating it.

Perhaps the most fundamental question about news stereotypes, or frames of reference, is whether the public is given any choice about them – whether, that is, it is permitted to choose between alternative visions of what the issue is. For in the absence of such choice, the public can do little more than follow the elite consensus on what should be done. For example, in the early phase of American involvement in the Vietnam War, the public was offered only one way to think about the war, namely as a struggle to preserve freedom by “containing Communism.” Even news stories that criticized government policy did so within a framework that assumed the paramount importance of winning the war and defeating communism (Halberstam, 1979; Hallin, 1986). During this period, public support for American involvement in the war was very strong, and those members of the public most heavily exposed to the mass media supported the “official line” most strongly.

In the later phase of the war, however, journalists began to present information in ways suggesting that it was essentially a civil war among contending Vietnamese factions and hence both inessential to U.S. security interests and also perhaps unwinnable. Coverage implicitly supportive of the war continued, but it no longer had near-monopoly status. Owing, as I show in Chapter 9, to this change in media coverage, public support for the war weakened greatly. Also, heavy exposure to the mass media was no longer associated with support for the war, but with a polarization of opinion that reflected the division in political discourse. Politically attentive liberals within the general public tended to adopt the position taken by elites conventionally recognized as liberal, while politically attentive conservatives in the general public moved toward the position of conservative opinion leaders.

So, when elites uphold a clear picture of what should be done, the public tends to see events from that point of view, with the most politically attentive
members of the public most likely to adopt the elite position. When elites divide, members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition, with the most politically attentive members of the public mirroring most sharply the ideological divisions among the elite.

These claims about the effects of elite discourse, which are an important part of what this book will attempt to demonstrate, are obviously quite strong ones. By way of further preliminary examination, I would like to give an overview of the evolution of American racial attitudes in the twentieth century. I strongly emphasize that my purpose in reviewing this sensitive subject is not to convince anyone of the final correctness of my view, but only to illustrate as clearly as possible the general vision that underlies the more specific arguments of later chapters.

Elite discourse and racial attitudes

At the turn of the century, the United States was a deeply racist society – not only in the caste structure of the southern states and in the widespread practice of discrimination, but in the political ideas that informed elite and mass thinking about race. Although there was some mainstream elite disagreement on the subject of race, it was confined to a very narrow range. Virtually all white elites accepted some notion of the inferiority of other racial groups (Fredrickson, 1971). It is both distasteful and unnecessary to recount these ideas, but one point is important to the argument I wish to make. It is that racist ideas about blacks – and, indeed, about most non-Anglo-Saxon groups, including Asians, southern and eastern Europeans, and Jews – had the support of the biological and psychological science of that period. Racist ideas, thus, were not confined to an extremist or backwater fringe; they were as common among the nation’s white intellectual leaders as among other types of whites. Given this pattern of elite attitudes, any attempts to mobilize white support for black equality, whether by blacks themselves or sympathetic whites, were bound to fail.

By 1930, however, the attitudes of political elites seemed to be changing. In that year, President Hoover’s nomination of John Parker of North Carolina to the Supreme Court was rejected in large part because of a ten-year-old speech in which Parker had said that “The Negro as a class does not desire to enter politics” and that the “participation of the Negro in politics is a source of evil and danger to both races” (cited in Kluger, 1975: p. 142). That a single racist speech, of a type that was entirely conventional throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, could become a basis for the rejection of a Supreme Court nominee by the Senate was an indication that attitudes toward race were undergoing a historic shift.

Despite this, race was apparently not a major public issue in the 1930s (Sheatsley 1966: p. 217). Moreover, Gunnar Myrdal (1944), in his massive investigation of American race relations, found that neither the material condition of blacks nor the amount of discrimination they faced were much different in
1940 than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. To the extent that there had been any improvement at all, it was only because some blacks had migrated to the North, where conditions had always been somewhat better. Nonetheless, Myrdal maintained that a period of great racial progress lay just ahead. White Americans believed deeply in their creed of equality and had come to realize that black demands for equality were justified. He therefore thought the days of white resistance to racial equality were near their end.

Thus, by Myrdal’s account, which proved extraordinarily prescient, a change in white attitudes preceded any change in the actual conditions of blacks. What, then, brought about the attitude change?

One can imagine many possibilities, but Myrdal found the explanation in purely intellectual developments. Scientists, who as recently as 1920 had overwhelmingly endorsed the notion that some racial groups were superior to others, had by their subsequent research discredited it. The magnitude of the change in scientific thinking is captured by the following two passages from the work of Carl Brigham, who was for a time a leading authority on race. In 1923 Brigham concluded his *Study of American Intelligence* by claiming flatly that “‘the intellectual superiority of our Nordic group over the Alpine, Mediterranean, and negro groups has been demonstrated’” (p. 192). However, in a review of subsequent research that was published just seven years later, Brigham felt compelled to withdraw this conclusion. As he wrote in the final sentence of his paper,

>This review has summarized some of the more recent test findings which show that comparative studies of various national and racial groups may not be made with existing tests, and which show, in particular, that one of the most pretentious of these comparative racial studies – the author’s own – was without foundation. (Brigham, 1930: p. 165)

Reviewing this and other research, Myrdal wrote that “‘A handful of social and biological scientists over the past fifty years have gradually forced informed people to give up some of the more blatant of our biological errors’” (p. 92). As Degler (1991) has recently shown, changing scientific theories of race in the 1920s were part of a much larger scientific movement away from biological explanations of human behavior.\(^1\)

With the intellectual defeat of early theories of racial inferiority, psychologists shifted their research to the stigmatizing effects on blacks of what was now taken to be white prejudice, and to the origins of racial prejudice in various kinds of mental disorders and educational deficiencies (Allport, 1954).\(^2\)

In consequence of all this, the stereotypes used to explain racial differences in material conditions underwent a major change. Until about 1930 these stereotypes stressed racial inferiority as the reason for inequality. Since then the

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1 Degler (1991) has also made the interesting argument that the new research was ideologically motivated in the sense that its practitioners were nonrationally committed to the defeat of racist theories. This may or may not be true. But Degler makes no argument that fraud or dishonesty was present in the research, nor does he present any evidence that the large number of scientists who decided to accept the research were motivated by anything other than their own judgments of the facts of the matter.

2 The possibility that white prejudice might have been due, at least in part, to the racist elite discourse of previous decades was not, so far as I can tell, given serious consideration.