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978-0-521-52787-3 - Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics: Opinion Surveys and the Will of the People

Scott L. Althaus

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Collective Preferences in Democratic Politics

How useful can opinion surveys be as inputs to the political process when most people know little about politics but are nevertheless willing to give opinions on even the most esoteric policy issues when asked to do so by pollsters? This study, the first comprehensive treatment of the relationship between knowledge, representation, and political equality in opinion surveys, suggests some surprising answers. Knowledge does matter, and the way it is distributed in society can cause collective preferences to reflect disproportionately the opinions of some groups more than others. Sometimes collective preferences seem to represent something like the will of the people, but frequently they do not. Sometimes they rigidly enforce political equality in the expression of political viewpoints, but often they do not. The primary culprit is not any inherent shortcoming in the methods of survey research. Rather, it is the limited degree of knowledge held by ordinary citizens about public affairs and the tendency for some kinds of people to be better informed than others. Accounting for these factors can help survey researchers, journalists, politicians, and concerned citizens better appreciate the pitfalls and possibilities for using opinion polls to represent the people's voice.

Scott L. Althaus earned his Ph.D. in Political Science at Northwestern University and is associate professor of Speech Communication and associate professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. His research interests center on the communication processes that equip ordinary citizens to exercise popular sovereignty in democratic societies, as well as on the communication processes by which the opinions of these citizens are conveyed to government officials. His research has appeared in the *American Political Science Review*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, *Communication Research*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, the *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, and *Political Communication*.

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For Ellen

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Acknowledgments

This book is an attempt to conduct public opinion research in what Paul Lazarsfeld (1957) called the “classical tradition”: using empirical methods to pursue and refine the foundational questions about popular sovereignty raised by political theorists. If this effort meets with the reader’s approval, it is in no small part because of the many people who have either shaped my thinking or tangibly contributed to this project along the way.

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Soli Deo Gloria

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