The American Public Mind

The Issues Structure of Mass Politics in the Postwar United States

What is the real nature of substantive conflict in mass politics during the postwar years in the United States? How is it reflected in the American public mind? And how does this issue structure shape electoral conflict? William J. M. Claggett and Byron E. Shafer answer by developing measures of public preference in four great policy realms – social welfare, international relations, civil rights, and cultural values – for the entire period between 1952 and 2004. They use these to identify the issues that were moving the voting public at various points in time, while revealing the way in which public preferences shaped the structure of electoral politics. What results is the restoration of policy substance to the center of mass politics in the United States.

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The Issues Structure of Mass Politics in the Postwar United States

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For Robert A. Dahl

Who Knows that

Ordinary People can do Extraordinary Things
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Preface

What is the real nature of substantive conflict in American politics during the postwar years? And more precisely, how is it reflected in the American public mind? Is it even possible to talk about an “issue structure,” about ongoing policy conflict with continuing policy alignments, at the mass and not just the elite level? If so, what is the ongoing structure of issue conflict characterizing the mass politics of our time? How do policy issues cluster, and nest, within this substantive environment for mass politics? How does the resulting issue structure relate to, and shape, electoral conflict? Has this relationship remained essentially constant over the last half-century, the period for which public opinion data are most widely available? Or are there major breakpoints, and, if so, when did they occur?

Those are the questions that motivate this book. Despite more than fifty years of survey data about public preferences, work on issue evolution – on the changing identity of those policy issues that actually shape political behavior within the general public – is still in its early days. This is surely not for lack of great events apparently requiring some public response during all the postwar years. There is war and peace, boom and recession, plus social change nearly everywhere one looks. Likewise, there is no shortage of grand policy conflicts following on from these events: conflicts over social welfare, international relations, civil rights, and cultural values. There is even a regular device – an institutional means – for inviting the public into these conflicts and then registering public wishes, in the form of recurrent electoral contests.

Despite all of that, the story of substantive conflict within the general public and its reflection in mass politics tends to be told only in pieces, for highly focused realms at particular points in time, when it is told at all. This wound is partly self-inflicted. Serious scholars have argued that the public lacks stable preferences – or sometimes any preferences – on leading public issues, so that the apparent substance of policy and politicking cannot really be shaping electoral contests. Partly, the situation also reflects inherent problems with the relevant evidence, problems often taken to be intractable. The American
National Election Study, the centerpiece of research on political opinion, is now itself more than fifty years old; yet long stretches of stable items on policy preferences remain in short supply.

The result has added up to further self-limitation. If the underlying phenomenon is in doubt and the clarifying evidence is in short supply, perhaps scholars would be well advised to look elsewhere: to focus on procedural or presentational rather than substantive influences on politics, to confine themselves to topics with a narrower time frame, and thus to banish the explicitly political elements – governmental policies and public preferences on them – from the study of politics? Perhaps the picture that would result from trying to do the opposite, from trying to address policy substance in the public mind, is so inherently mottled that it cannot be refocused in any intelligible way? Perhaps a mottled picture, along with measurement difficulties both familiar and intractable, has rightly caused analysts not to worry about a focus on policy substance and issue conflict?

We think not, and The American Public Mind sets out to take an alternative view: that the complexity of the empirical phenomenon itself, plus the difficulties in addressing it systematically, have caused analysts to concentrate their energies elsewhere – at the cost of making American politics look more idiosyncratic, more subject to ephemeral influences, more organized by nonsubstantive structures, and less organized by ongoing issue conflict and policy preference than is actually the case. To sharpen the contrast, we take what is, in effect, the opposite approach. Ours is an effort to see how much of postwar politics within the general public can be explained by knowing the policy preferences of rank-and-file voters, a few key pieces of historical background, and only that.

Three tasks are central to such an undertaking. Admittedly, each is substantial in its own right. Yet if they can be addressed successfully, they constitute the main contributions of such a book. In any case, it is impossible to talk about issue evolution in postwar American politics without meeting three central requirements:

- First, it is necessary to have consistent measures of public preferences within the main realms of policy conflict for the entire postwar era.
- Second, it is necessary to meld these measures to create an overarching issue context for every year with an electoral contest in this era.
- And third, it is necessary to relate the elements of this issue context to voting behavior in each of those elections.

The search for a continuing structure characterizing public preferences on policy conflicts and capable of shaping mass political behavior is thus the principal challenge of this book. Its first step is arguably the most important. Consistent measures of public preference in four major issue domains – welfare policy, foreign policy, race policy, and social policy – are sought, developed, and analyzed. To that end, a theoretical grounding for these key domains is derived from the literature on postwar political history. An exploratory factor
analysis then applies this theoretical grounding to the American National Election Study, 1948–2004. After that, a confirmatory factor analysis, as informed both by the results of this exploratory analysis and by a review of the professional literature on public opinion in each of these policy domains, is used to produce ongoing measures of public preferences across the entire postwar period.

That is the critical first product of the enterprise. Yet this result is also well on its way to providing the ongoing issue structure, an issue context for each postwar election, that is necessary to the total project. Moreover, confirmatory factor analyses actually facilitate the combination of these individual measures into a single comprehensive model, while simultaneously checking on the relationships that theory would suggest for its main elements. It is worth underlining the theoretical importance of this further procedural step. Relationships between the vote and, say, civil rights or foreign affairs may look very different when those issue domains are studied, not in isolation and for themselves but within a comprehensive issue context – the way that they actually appeared in their time.

Creation of these overarching contexts, in turn, permits a hunt for relationships between the issue context of each postwar election and the vote. The presence, strength, and direction of these relationships, when they appear, are themselves fundamental structures in American politics. We try to keep them at the center of the analysis. We also attempt to tease out the critical differences within them: differences among policy domains, across temporal eras, and even among partisan subgroups. Sometimes, however, it is the absence of all such relationships that requires explanation. If there is no link between policy options and voting behavior at the height of the Cold War or the civil rights revolution, for example, then why is that? The collective result is a picture of issue evolution for the postwar period in the American public mind.

The reasons that this has not been accomplished previously are evident and daunting. The theoretical phenomenon itself is complex; the relevant data were never collected with these purposes in mind. Still, we believe that a combination of strong theory plus the best available methods – in this case, confirmatory factor analysis and structural equation modeling, supplemented by newly sophisticated ways of handling missing data – offers a reasonable hope of success. And, if successful, the payoff is large. Not only would the structure of the postwar issue environment be mapped across, and not just within, policy domains. Postwar elections also would (or at least could) be given a strong substantive interpretation – if this continuing issue structure can indeed be isolated and if it can be shown to be tied to actual voting behavior.

The same thing could be said more acerbically. Journalistic interpreters of American politics often treat the subject as if it were all strategy, horse race, and hoopla, essentially lacking in any dominant issue content. Yet academic interpreters who have tried to avoid this approach (and its associated conclusions) have often relied upon structural factors – most commonly partisanship – to provide a kind of surrogate substance. Either way, the great issues of politics,
along with the combat over public policy that elections theoretically represent, get pushed to the sidelines. We believe it is easy to interpret American politics in terms of the policy conflicts at its center. Moreover, we believe that we can tease these out from mass (and not just elite) concerns, so that they return as a central part of the story, influential and data-driven.

The manuscript that tells this story did not set out to do so. We began, more than a decade ago, to return to the issue structure of American politics by a different route. Our own earlier effort to grapple with this structure (Shafer and Claggett 1995) had been generally well received. If critics had a complaint, it was that an intendedly fundamental argument had been built on a single survey at a single point in time. So we set out to see whether we could elicit the same argument from a much longer but also much thinner body of survey data by way of the American National Election Studies (ANES).

In relatively short order, we found ourselves refocused. From one side, the effort to elicit an ongoing structure that could be recognized in each and every ANES proved even more demanding than we had anticipated. From the other, it came to seem more important to tease out the consequences of this structure itself, if it could be elicited, rather than to boil it down to two simple summary measures. At the same time, these struggles suggested – to us, and we hope now to others – that there were substantial side benefits in understanding the contents of the ANES and their implications, benefits that followed from the overall effort and that constituted virtues that we had certainly not considered when we began.

In any case, we were sustained in this effort not just by a certain mutual stubbornness but also by some important working relationships that developed along the way. The most important of these involved J. Merrill Shanks of the University of California, Edward G. “Ted” Carmines of Indiana University, and the PACES project. Merrill and Ted were in part seeking a much richer version of what we were trying to do, with better data and a more contemporary focus, just as we were in part seeking a longer temporal reach in what they were trying to do. As a result, there was a time several years ago when we were placed on the same panels so frequently at the American Political Science Association (APSA) and Midwest Political Science Association (MPSA) that we continually threatened to present each others’ papers.

While they have been cursed less often with common panel appearances, Christopher Wlezien of Temple University and Stuart N. Soroka of McGill University have likewise been pursuing a project with clear resonances, one that also provided us with encouragement and reinforcement. And there was a critical point later in the manuscript, with the voting analysis, when Henry E. Brady of the University of California took extended time out of the APSA meeting where he was program chair to help sort out some conceptual issues that appear, in hindsight, to be crucial to what follows.

Financial support came from the Andrew W. Mellon Chair in American Government at Oxford University and the Glenn B. and Cleone Orr Hawkins
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Chair in American Politics at the University of Wisconsin, allowing us, among other advantages, to work together during many summers. That work has been ably supported by two research assistants: Stacey Pelika, who is now on the faculty of The College of William and Mary, and Amber Wichowsky, who is finishing her doctoral work at the University of Wisconsin. We have not hesitated to task each of them with particular interpretive problems as we progressed, so that they have been much more than “data handlers” in the course of this project – though we are sure that both can produce AMOS graphics in their sleep.

Late on, the project acquired a supportive staff at Cambridge University Press in New York as well. Lewis Bateman, Senior Editor for Political Science and History, reached out to this project when it promised less and had far less to show as justification for what it did promise. His consistent support has freed us from further concerns about the publication process. He in turn was supported by Emily Spangler, Senior Editorial Assistant for History and Politics, who was often our contact for operational questions. Helen Wheeler was Production Editor for the book itself. All managed to retain their patience with our arguments about how the book should present itself.

Finally, the project was in a very real sense supported by the spirit of three others. Robert A. Dahl gets the dedication not just because he has been the preeminent political scientist of our lifetime but even more because he articulates implicitly the message that this analysis implies. The late V. O. Key, Jr., made the same argument explicitly; we borrow its crucial sentences as the closing paragraph for the book. And Norman Rockwell provided the graphic for the cover to the paperback edition, in his iconic Freedom of Speech from The Four Freedoms. We thank John Rockwell and the Rockwell Family Agency for facilitating the use of a graphic that we think aligns powerfully with the message of this book.