

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Tides of Consent

*How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*  
Second Edition

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 and Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation. 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*, *Ideology in America*, and *The Macro Polity*. Professor Stimson has served as Editor of *Political Analysis* and has served on the editorial board of journals such as the *American Journal of Political Science* and *The Journal of Politics*. He has authored many articles published in major political science journals and is the recipient of various awards for his distinguished scholarship.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

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

*In recognition of some old debts, never repaid.*

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

# Tides of Consent

*How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*  
*Second Edition*

JAMES A. STIMSON

*University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill*



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

**CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning, and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107518919](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107518919)

© James A. Stimson 2004, 2015

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2004

Second edition 2015

Printed in the United States of America

*A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.*

ISBN 978-1-107-10817-2 Hardback

ISBN 978-1-107-51891-9 Paperback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	xi
<i>Preface to the Second Edition</i>	xiii
<i>Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xxv
<b>1</b> Opinion Flows	<b>I</b>
1.1 <i>The Hostages</i>	I
1.2 <i>A Theory of Public Opinion</i>	10
1.3 <i>Some Postulates About Opinion Movement</i>	12
1.4 <i>Design of the Book</i>	18
<b>2</b> What the Public Wants of Government	<b>20</b>
2.1 <i>Thinking About Public Opinion</i>	22
2.2 <i>Absolute and Relative</i>	26
2.3 <i>Means and Ends</i>	28
2.4 <i>What Are the Considerations: Policy Domains</i>	32
2.5 <i>Some Newer Policy Conflicts</i>	46
<b>3</b> Left and Right Movements in Preference	<b>52</b>
3.1 <i>The Issue Evolution Theory of Issue Alignment</i>	54
3.2 <i>Three Issue Evolutions</i>	62
3.3 <i>Preferences for Liberalism and Conservatism</i>	68
3.4 <i>Ideology: Operational and Symbolic</i>	74
<b>4</b> The Great Horse Race: Finding Meaning in Presidential Campaigns	<b>85</b>
4.1 <i>The Lore of Presidential Campaigns: Three Stories</i>	88
4.2 <i>Do the Polls Predict Presidential Elections?</i>	95

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi

*Contents*

4.3	<i>So, What Really Matters?</i>	101
4.4	<i>Party Nominating Conventions</i>	109
4.5	<i>Candidate Debates</i>	117
5	Between the Campaigns: Public Approval and Disapproval of Government	125
5.1	<i>The Presidency</i>	128
5.2	<i>U.S. Senators</i>	136
5.3	<i>Governors</i>	139
5.4	<i>Trust in Government</i>	140
5.5	<i>Is Approval Generic?</i>	141
6	On Politics at the Margin	146
6.1	<i>A Tale of Three Elections</i>	147
6.2	<i>Who Accounts for Change in American Politics?</i>	150
6.3	<i>The Rhythms of Opinion: A Reconsideration</i>	152
6.4	<i>On Marginal Democracy</i>	156
	<i>Bibliography</i>	159
	<i>Index</i>	163

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## List of Figures

2.1	Trends in Support for Desegregation (Blacks), Equal Role (Women), and Equal Rights to Jobs (Homosexuals): 1964 to 2001	<i>page</i> 31
2.2	Support for Greater Federal Involvement in Education: 1956 to 2012	34
2.3	Support for Greater Federal Involvement in Healthcare: 1956 to 2012	36
2.4	Support for Greater Federal Aid to Cities: 1965 to 2012	38
2.5	Support for Pro-Environment Policies: 1960 to 2012	40
2.6	Support for Federal Improvement in Race Relations: 1956 to 2012	41
2.7	Support for Greater Federal Involvement in Welfare: 1964 to 2012	43
2.8	Tolerance for Paying Federal Income Taxes: 1947 to 2012	44
2.9	Issue Dynamics of the Welfare State: Seven Domestic Issue Domains Collapsed Together	45
2.10	Support for Stricter Gun Control: 1959 to 2012	47
2.11	Opposition to the Death Penalty: 1956 to 2012	48
2.12	GSS Respondents Who Would Allow Legal Abortion Under Various Circumstances: 1973 to 2012	50
2.13	Support for Abortion Choice: 1972 to 2012	51
3.1	Correlations Between Partisanship and School Desegregation Attitudes: National Election Studies, 1960 to 2000	64
3.2	Correlations Between Partisanship and Women's Role Attitudes: National Election Studies, 1960 to 2012	66
		vii

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

*List of Figures*

3.3	Correlations Between Partisanship and Abortion Attitudes: National Election Studies, 1960 to 2012	68
3.4	An Estimate of National Preference Liberalism as an Average of the Seven Welfare State Issues of Figure 2.9: 1960 to 2012	69
3.5	The Derived Left-Right Dimension of Policy Preferences: 1952 to 2012	71
3.6	Changes in Liberal and Conservative Preferences by Administration in Power	72
3.7	Ideological Self-Identification: Percent Liberal of Those Who Class Themselves “Liberal” or “Conservative”: 1937 to 2012	76
3.8	Domestic Spending Preferences: Net Percent Saying “Too Little” in Six New Deal Program Areas	77
3.9	GSS Net Spending Preferences Compared to Preference Liberalism from Figure 3.5: 1973 to 2012	79
3.10	The Composition of Self-Declared Ideologues (Moderates Excluded) by Consistency with Domestic Spending Preferences	80
4.1	Four Incumbents Easily Reelected: 1964, 1972, 1984, and 1996	103
4.2	Three Campaign Tracks: 1968, 1976, and 1980	105
4.3	Three Campaign Tracks: 1988, 1992, and 2000	105
4.4	Three Campaign Tracks: 2004, 2008, and 2012	106
4.5	The 2012 Horse Race: Obama Percent and Smooth Approximation	108
4.6	The Smooth Variation in the Campaigns of 2004, 2008, and 2012	109
4.7	The Effect of the Second Party Convention Over Twenty-Eight Days: Daily Estimates and Smoothed Effect	112
4.8	The Obama Bounce in 2012	113
4.9	Winner Percent of the Two-Party Intended Vote for Eight Contested Campaigns, Smoothed: 1976, 1980, 1988, 1992, 2000, 2004, 2008, and 2012	119
4.10	Debate Timing and Opinion Movement for the 1960, 1976, and 1980 Campaigns	121
4.11	Debate Timing and Opinion Movement for the 1988, 1992, and 2000 Campaigns	122
4.12	Debate Timing and Opinion Movement for the 2004, 2008, and 2012 Campaigns	123
5.1	Approval Ratings for Five Recent Presidents: Monthly, 1981 to 2014	129
5.2	Approval Ratings of Barack Obama: 2009 to 2014	131



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

<i>List of Figures</i>	ix
5.3 Senator Approval by Party: 1981 to 2009	137
5.4 Approval of “Congress”: 1981 to 2009	139
5.5 Governor Approval and Senator Approval: Annual, 1981 to 2009	140
5.6 Trust in Government Compared to Approval of “Congress”: Quarterly, 1981 to 2009	141
5.7 Generic Approval Quarterly, Along with Approval of Presidents, Senators, Governors, and Congress, and Trust in Government: 1981 to 2009	142
5.8 Generic Approval and the Michigan Index of Consumer Sentiment (Three-Quarter Moving Average): 1981 to 2009	144
6.1 Democratic Votes Shares in House Elections: 1952 to 2012	148

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

## List of Tables

- |     |   |                |
|-----|---|----------------|
| 3.1 | Average Spending Preferences of Liberals, Moderates,<br>and Conservatives | <i>page 78</i> |
| 4.1 | The Record of the Polls: Election-Eve Prediction<br>Success               | 98             |

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface to the Second Edition

Following a defiant speech at ground zero in New York City, George W. Bush, just a few months into his first term, was among the most approved presidents of all time. By 2002 American troops, in alliance with Afghans, had succeeded in removing the Taliban from control of Afghanistan. The war to come in Iraq was then just speculation. After an unusual four-year run of budget surpluses, the budget of the U.S. government was newly in deficit from a recession and tax cut in 2001 – a later cut to come in 2003 was not yet on the horizon. Barack Obama then represented the 13th District of Illinois in the Illinois state Senate and was a complete unknown to political sophisticates in Washington. The American economy then was in the early stages of recovery from a fairly typical postwar recession beginning in March 2001. The housing bubble that would eventually crash the worldwide economy would have then been too small to notice. A financial panic of a scale comparable to the one that preceded the Great Depression was thought not to be possible in a modern market economy. These were the facts on the ground when I did much of the research and writing for the first edition of *Tides of Consent* in 2002.

In many ways the America of 2002 would be hard to recognize today. Much has changed since then. So much of what I wrote in 2002 bears reexamination in light of a twelve-year newer perspective. That is two separable tasks. One is simply bringing things up to date. In this edition I have decided, where possible, to bring analyses up through the end of the Obama first term and the 2012 presidential election, although I occasionally exploit data as new as June 2014. The goal of updating is just to make things current, to end the story well into the second decade of the twenty-first century rather than at the century's outset.

But also new data can lead to new conclusions. The conclusions of the longitudinal analyses were based on robust samples. Adding some 10 to 15 percent new cases to them should not often alter the patterns that they show, but it does

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

open the possibility. One such case will be seen in Chapter 4 on the presidential election horse race. In the first edition, I argued that presidential debates had little to no influence on the outcomes of presidential elections (although there were cases where the margins were so razor thin that nothing could be excluded as a possible influence). That conclusion did not square comfortably with the first presidential debate of the 2012 contest, where President Obama performed poorly, and, in consequence, a comfortable margin over Mitt Romney was reduced to what seemed to be a close race to Election Day. Of course, the debate did not change the outcome. That would have required an Obama defeat. But it really did matter in that it changed the dynamics of the rest of the contest. So I have backed off of “debates don’t matter” to something like “debates don’t matter very much or very often.” But the possibility of important effects is not foreclosed. Had Obama not improved in the second and third debates, defeat would have been a likely outcome.

In addition, the literature on all these public opinion issues has not stood still since 2002. Sometimes issues have been pursued in greater detail. That is the case with the Chapter 3 discussion of conflict between symbolic and operational versions of ideology, little more than a suggestion in the chapter that gave birth to a book-length treatment in *Ideology in America* (Ellis and Stimson 2012). And the treatment of the quality of representation now takes into account the recent work arguing that politicians mainly represent their wealthy constituents.

In the end there is more that is the same than is different. This is a revised edition, not a new book.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Preface to the First Edition: 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 fundamentally alter 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, had eluded even Ronald Reagan: to actually cut down on the 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 would actually reduce spending across the board for healthcare, education, environment, and welfare. Cutting welfare was popular and 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 even welfare cuts might not be costless.

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

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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 Gingrich was in the driver’s seat. Congress, never popular with the American public, was drawing an approval rating of 47 percent. Because the public was behind Gingrich, and there was an unpopular president with a history of backing down when challenged, this aggressive strategy seemed like 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 allows the government to continue operating as it did under the expired budget. But this time there would be no continuing resolution.<sup>2</sup> President Clinton could sign on to the Republican plan or watch government halt and wait 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 and that the showdown would not come to pass. By 77% and 79% *NBC News* and *Wall Street Journal* polls of September and October, respectively, predicted that the budget would be resolved somehow without a shutdown. Threatening dire consequences is a pretty 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

<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.



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

xvii

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 mid-forties approval during Gingrich’s first 100 days to low fifties 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; those vacationing in the West may not be able to see the wildlife in national parks. There was no sense of crisis, no fear 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 myriad 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 the 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 about aborted vacation plans; it was lives disrupted. A Gallup survey soon after the onset captured a concerned public. Asked whether the partial shutdown was a serious problem, 51% said that it was a crisis or a serious problem. Only 14% 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 about 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% or so condemning both equally. All of a sudden, it was becoming clear that the pressure to

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

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xviii

*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

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% 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%, congressional approval had fallen steadily, not just back to its normal level of about 36%, but below that, down to the low twenties 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 may not have benefited the president, but it clearly did not hurt him. The pressure to settle now shifted. Clinton looked like 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 linking 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 for another month.

When the government shut down again in mid-December, there was no longer any suspense about who was winning and who was 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 on a deal with the White House amid talk of sellout from the House freshmen, who saw their balanced budget plan and the shutdown as an 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, such as 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.

<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 year 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.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

xix

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 captured the feeling: "Battle Over the Budget: The Republicans; Split and Bruised in Polls, G.O.P. Weighs New Tactics" (*New York Times*, January 5, 1996). 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 as 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. It 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 they mean. What moves politics is the real movements by the national electorate that the polls measure.

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, like 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 upon public support that success depends upon 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 motive 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 facts 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 it is one that puts the public in the driver's seat of politics, a common view of how democracy should be but 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,

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

slow-moving sequence in which citizens form opinions and then 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 and must act now because later is too late.

But this isn't public opinion as it is commonly understood, what percent favors or opposes some proposal or approves or disapproves of the president. *It is movement that matters.* Politicians ask, "How will the public 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 (Lax and Phillips 2012). This static opinion is often toothless. When politicians know that the important public consensus is 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 intruding 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 awakened 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 a superficial look. When we get beneath the surface to the public itself, not just the samples of it, it is smooth, tracing a path from here to there like a giant ship, not jerky like a kite. We don't often see that because it requires an awful lot of data, and it requires a belief in the smoothness to go after it. But that is what matters, and that is what we will 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.<sup>5</sup> This new science of public

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Enns and Kellstedt (2008), Kelly and Enns (2010), Ellis and Faricy (2011), and Ura and Ellis (2012).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

xxi

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.

Much of that story is already written, although some will be 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 know nothing about equations and regressions, nothing about the jargon of public opinion research.

**On How the Book Came to Be Written**

Since 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 material in 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 daily standing of the candidates. This was an improvement over the public debate on polls, which observed that they differed a bit and argued, endlessly, which of them should be believed. Using all of them is undeniably

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - *Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics*:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxii

*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

better than using any one.<sup>6</sup> I posted my daily estimates to a website 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 my interest in horse race polling and the analyses of Chapter 4.

Earlier in 2000, 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) that left me impressed with both how much we had learned in a brief time and 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 the student papers from that seminar 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, see Keele 2005 and Keele 2007), approval of Congress (Adam Newmark), and U.S. senator approval (Jennifer Anderson).<sup>7</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 that 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 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.

<sup>6</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 doing 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; it is very reliable. Because no one owned it, until recent elections this much better estimate was unreported. In recent years the RealClearPolitics.com site and others have begun to report simple polling averages.

<sup>7</sup> The Anderson and Newmark research was later combined and published as Anderson and Newmark (2002).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---

*Preface to the First Edition: The Shutdown*

xxiii

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 of vision, not from intent.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Acknowledgments

Although the first edition of this book was written in 2002 and 2003, the book has a history. Its contents reflect a good deal of the joint product of seventeen years of active collaboration with Michael B. MacKuen and Robert S. Erikson. When ideas are shared, as many in this book have been, they become melded by all and lose most of their original authorship. So it is honest to say that of the many ideas we have shared, many of which are in this book, it is no longer clear where most originated and what they would have been if not critiqued and revised by the interchange of coauthorship. Mike and Bob have not joined in authoring this book, but I am sure they will find much of themselves in it. It is trite but necessary to say that I alone am responsible for errors of fact or interpretation.

I owe a special debt to John McIver. John read the manuscript with care, commented at great length and detail, and improved the book in hundreds of matters, some large. Many coauthors have done less to shape a final product. Paul Kellstedt, Dianne Stimson, and one anonymous referee for Cambridge University Press have also read the manuscript in full and pressed me to do better on many fronts. Daniel Hamilton read the manuscript with a focus on accessibility issues and pointed out problems that required better writing.

The policy-specific mood estimates of Chapter 2 of the second edition derive from support by National Science Foundation grant 1024291 for “Developing Policy-Specific Measures of Public Opinion,” James A. Stimson and Frank R. Baumgartner, co-principal investigators.

Frank Baumgartner, James Campbell, K. Elizabeth Coggins, Chris Ellis, Peter Enns, Brian Frederick, Larry Grossback, Luke Keele, Nate Kelly, Chuck Myers, David Peterson, Joe Ura, and Chris Wlezien read and commented on portions of the book. The issue evolution theory in Chapter 3 was developed jointly with Edward G. Carmines. The ideas in Chapter 6 on the emergent properties of aggregates in a population of mixed political response styles were sharpened

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-10817-2 - Tides of Consent: How Public Opinion Shapes American Politics:  
Second Edition

James A. Stimson

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xxvi

*Acknowledgments*

by highly focused discussions on information processing and aggregation with Evan Parker-Stephen, Ashleigh Smith, and Jorge Bravo. Students in my honors sections of Introduction to American Government in 2002 and 2003 read the manuscript and helped it by pointing out problems with accessibility. I owe Larry Dodd a special thanks for encouraging an earlier book that lent much to this effort.

Although well hidden in this work, the raw data archived by the Roper Center for Public Opinion Research of the University of Connecticut at Storrs are what makes possible the serious study of public opinion change. I am grateful to Lois Timms-Ferrara and Marc Maynard for generous assistance in my efforts and to former director Mark Abrahamson for keeping the Center vibrant during challenging times. Portions of Chapter 1 and virtually all of Chapter 5 rely on the Job Approval Ratings database of state polls, a cooperative project of the University of Rochester, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and George Washington University, a wonderful contribution to opinion scholarship of Richard Niemi, Thad Beyle, and Lee Sigelman.

And finally, I thank the members of the American Politics Research Group of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. That remarkable assemblage is where many of my ideas are first tested, and where the worst ones die.