Critical Review
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t778142998

Introduction: Public opinion and democracy

Jeffrey Friedman

Online Publication Date: 01 December 1996

To cite this Article Friedman, Jeffrey(1996)'Introduction: Public opinion and democracy',Critical Review,10:1,1 — 12
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/08913819608443406
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08913819608443406

Jeffrey Friedman

INTRODUCTION: PUBLIC OPINION AND DEMOCRACY

The November 1994 Congressional elections were widely supposed to have signalled a rejection of "big government" and of President Clinton's attempt to expand the role of the state by instituting universal health insurance. Yet the public's "shift to the right" came only two years after Clinton's own election was interpreted as a mandate for just such a health-care initiative—presaged, in turn, by the 1991 upset senatorial election of Pennsylvania Democrat Harris Wofford, who pioneered the issue. This apparent "volatility" of the American electorate, morever, did not come to an end in 1994. Barely a year after the Republican sweep, opinion polls seemed to show a repudiation of the Republicans' antigovernment program—a shift back to the left, or at least to the center.

Undeterred by this good fortune, the president announced, in his January 1996 State of the Union Address, that "the era of big government is over," giving voice to the once-derided view of the Democrats' archenemy, Ronald Reagan—whose election in 1980, like the Republican victory in 1994, had been christened a "shift to the right." Yet Clinton and his Congressional allies proceeded to put the Republicans on the defensive by championing an increase in the minimum wage—a proposal that, according to the polls, was supported by upwards of 80 percent of the American people. Perhaps the era of big government is not over, after all.

Such a conclusion is suggested by Eric R. A. N. Smith's and Jens

Critical Review 10, no. 1 (Winter 1996). ISSN 0891-3811.

Borchert's articles in this issue. Smith finds in three recent books on American public opinion strong evidence that the trend of the 1980s was actually toward economic liberalism (i.e., big government). Borchert points to studies showing that in other countries as well, including Britain, Canada, and Germany, public support for the interventionist, redistributive state remained strong (90n18 below). Borchert argues that what accounts for the politics of welfare-state retrenchment since the 1970s has been a shift in elite opinion—even leftist elite opinion—toward the view that international economic competition mandates a reduction in government intervention and redistribution. Public opinion, then, far from driving policy to the right, has been disconnected from policy.

The received wisdom about public opinion, like the notion that electoral shifts represent ideological "sea changes" or "mandates," is that it represents the public's deliberative judgments about "the issues" being debated in the public forum—the "marketplace of ideas" analyzed below by Robert Weissberg. This view is part of the conventional self-understanding of modern democracies; it is consistent with what might be called the myth (in a nonpejorative sense) of democracy. According to this myth, votes and polling data reflect a process of judgment commensurate with the large personnel and policy results of these expressions of public opinion. The shift of a few percentage points may profoundly affect the composition of a government; according to the myth of democracy, the public has made an informed judgment about these results and understands their consequences. Thus, for example, the election of a conservative president or legislature must correspond to a "shift to the right."

The myth of democracy, however, flies in the face of the bulk of serious research on public opinion in this century. As early as the 1920s, Walter Lippmann (e.g., 1922, 1925) noticed that most of the electors called upon to render judgments on political issues were grossly ignorant of politics. Shortly after World War II, the Columbia school of public-opinion research (see, e.g., Lazarsfeld, Berelson, and Gaudet 1948) systematically confirmed Lippmann's judgment, finding that voters were overwhelmingly uninterested in political issues and devoid of knowledge about them; and that, far from being moved by public debate, their voting decisions were determined by the politics of opinion leaders with similar demographic characteristics. The Columbia school has been superseded by the Michigan

school, but the news about the ignorance of the electorate has gotten no better. In *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960), University of Michigan researchers showed that widespread public ignorance of government policy and political debate made recourse to blindly inherited partisan commitments necessary to guide most people through the bewildering world of politics. Four years later, Michigan's Philip Converse argued, in "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," that the vast majority of the public is so far removed from political affairs that it has little or no grasp of such common belief systems as liberalism and conservatism. Instead, the uninformed public bases its political views on inherited partisan commitments, group loyalties, and a superficial grasp of "the nature of the times" (prosperity versus depression, war versus peace). Moreover, Converse suggested that many of the "attitudes" elicited by survey questions are so baseless as to be virtually random.

This "nonattitudes" thesis, as Converse later came to call it, prompted an unfortunate digression of the public-opinion literature into the question of the stability of individuals' survey responses over time. It may be that this increasingly technical debate, which turned on such matters as the proper coding of the Michigan survey responses, inadvertently served to defuse the explosive normative potential of the Michigan school's empirical findings. Thus, in such volumes as Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro's *The Rational Public* and James Stimson's *Public Opinion in America*, discussed by Smith below, rebuttals to Converse's nonattitudes thesis are presented as cause for optimism, as if the myth of democracy is vindicated if the public can be shown to have *stable* "attitudes," even though they are not minimally informed ones.

Authors who contest Converse's pessimistic conclusions in this way tend to damn the public with faint praise. Page and Shapiro (1992, 14) "grant the rational ignorance of most individuals, and the possibility that their policy preferences are shallow and unstable." They argue only that individual nonattitudes cancel each other out, such that "public opinion as a *collective* phenomenon is nonetheless stable (though not immovable), meaningful, and indeed rational in a higher, if somewhat looser, sense: it is able to make distinctions; it is organized in coherent patterns; it is reasonable, *based on the best available information*; and it is adaptive to new information or changed circumstances, responding in similar ways to similar stimuli" (ibid., second emphasis added). What the authors mean by "the

best available information" is considerably less than the myth of democracy demands. They admit that "it would be pure fantasy to imagine that the average American had carefully worked out what he or she thought" about such a hotly debated issue as the MX missile proposal of the early 1980s (ibid., 18). But, they write, "an individual could develop a central tendency of opinion, or long-term policy preference, either based upon accumulated specific beliefs about the MX or deferring to the judgment of others—like the Republican president, or trusted Democratic leaders, or a TV commentator" (ibid., 19). According to the myth of democracy, political and media figures are supposed to be following, or at most helping to inform, public opinion. They are not supposed to be able to influence it merely by making pronouncements, but Page, Shapiro, and Glenn R. Dempsey have shown that a single favorable commentary about a policy by a national news anchor may cause a four-point jump in its popularity (Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey 1987, 31). It appears that the mass public is so bereft of independent knowledge that the opinions of prominent figures easily substitute for public deliberation. This conclusion is impressively substantiated by John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (to be reviewed in a subsequent issue of this journal), the most nuanced, detailed application of Philip Converse's perspective yet to be published.

One need not believe that any one political or media figure—or any conspiracy of them—can deliberately orchestrate public opinion to see a major discrepancy between the myth of democracy and the reality described by the Michigan school and conceded by Page and Shapiro. When 48 percent of the U.S. public does not realize that there are two senators from each state, when the majority cannot name their congressional representative, and when 70 percent do not know that House terms are two years long; when 43 percent do not know what a recession is, and 76 percent cannot explain the First Amendment; and when, in 1964, only 38 percent knew that the USSR did not belong to NATO (Page and Shapiro 1992, 10–11)—then surely it would be surprising if the public had a grasp of the complexities of modern economics or even the particulars of public policy. While information about such matters as the name of one's political representative may be considered trivial (ibid., 12), people who follow public debate with any seriousness would be expected to pick it up along the way. Ignorance of such informa-

tion, therefore, strongly suggests widespread and deep disengagement from politics.

In the light of modern public-opinion research, Borchert's picture of elite policy making that disregards public sentiment becomes quite plausible—but it loses its sting. If the sentiment being disregarded is so ill informed, why *should* policy be tied to it? Democratic theorists' preoccupation with combatting elitism might seem misplaced.

On the other hand, the "directional" or backlash theory of opinion change endorsed by Smith, while congruent with public ignorance, may be thought to situate Borchert's argument in a way that is amenable to the conventional concerns of democratic theory. According to directional theory, since the public does not know enough about politics to have particular policy goals in mind, people "simply decide in which general direction they want policy to move" (below, 102), and this often boils down to opposing the policy direction of the moment. Combining this view with Borchert's findings, we might conclude that a public that was at least dimly aware of the retrenchment of big government in the 1980s reacted against it in the polls, but this backlash was ignored by policy-making elites. Thus, the problem is not so much an ignorant public as an uncontrolled state, and the solution is for the people to regain control of the government.

This view of the matter founders, however, when we return to the question of how the people come by their political views in the first place. If public backlash against Ronald Reagan was merely a product of the influence on an ignorant public exercised by political adversaries and television anchors, then aligning government policy with public opinion may not be warranted.

Since Plato's *Republic*, the question of democracy has usually been framed as that of the competence of the many versus that of the few. In the modern era, democrats have repulsed the Platonic challenge by pointing to the lack of an expert, and good, elite that could be relied upon to do better than government by the many. But one of the disturbing implications of modern public-opinion research is its identification of vastly different strata of political sophistication. As Converse showed, the top stratum consists of the heavily engaged *aficionado*—the social-science professoriat, readers of the sophisticated opinion journals, and so on. The members of this stratum perform well on the rudimentary tests of political

knowledge flunked by the general public, because they are, by vocation or avocation, avid followers of political affairs. From this stratum are drawn the opinion- and policy-making elites who actually govern us (cf. Halverson 1991).

The popularity of attacks on the motives of political opponents that is so much a part of democratic politics may have its source here. Such attacks are the only course open in many instances, since the public is incapable of assessing attacks on political elites' expertise. A far less tendentious way to challenge the rule of elites than by accusing them of mendacity, however, is opened up by what may be the most neglected part of Converse's argument. While Converse uses public ignorance of liberalism and conservatism to demonstrate the depths of most people's detachment from politics, he also shows that even the most attentive strata of the public are only marginally more qualified to govern—when judged against the standard of real knowledge—than those in the bottom epistemic strata. For what, in Converse's schema, defines the highest stratum of political sophistication is the kind of "attitude constraint" provided by liberalism and conservatism—which are, of course, *ideologies* in the worst sense. The reason members of the epistemic elite (unlike their lower-stratum peers) possess internally and intertemporally consistent political "attitudes" is that such people are rigidly attached to belief systems that are only "apparently logical wholes." Their attitudes are constrained, that is to say, less by unbiased information about the workings of modern society and government than by ideologies that are, in their own way, as deficient as group loyalties, partisan allegiances, or "nature of the times" assessments as guides for political action.

The "shaping of belief systems of any range" into ideologies "that are credible to large numbers of people is," Converse writes, "an act of creative synthesis characteristic of only a minuscule proportion of any population" (1964, 211). The rest of society, including the ideologically consistent elites who govern the state and shape public opinion, are merely playing out the hand dealt by these creative synthesizers. Political ignorance is, after all, not only rational for the inattentive voter—whose impact on public policy can hardly merit the effort of voting, let alone that of becoming well informed; it is rational, too, for the most committed ideologue—who is only slightly more influential on the vast body of the public, and who, in any case, cannot possibly hope to master the details of more than a

small corner of the political universe. Given the essentially limitless purview of modern politics, even the most attentive of us tend to amass informed opinions, outside our narrow areas of expertise, by adhering to "belief systems" that substitute dogma for real knowledge, constraining our views about public policy not through investigation of the evidence, but through a priori convictions about the way things *must* be.

Seen in this light, Converse is less a tribune of elite omniscience than a prophet of the overwhelming ignorance facing all members of the public. Both the sophisticated and the relatively uninformed are sufficiently ignorant that they are unlikely to find out political "truths" for themselves: the lower strata rely on cues from trusted elites, and elites rely on the trusted synthesizers of their ideologies. Political debate is thus, as Weissberg suggests, primarily a matter of expressing the predetermined and unshakable convictions or "preferences" of ideological elites. The marketplace of ideas is drastically unlike the scientific search for truth to which the myth of democracy inclines us to compare it.

None of this, however, means that democracy should be forsaken. If the myth of democracy is dubious, the reality need not be. As Fred Eidlin's obituary of Karl Popper points out, the reality of democracy to which public opinion research points is very similar to the realistic portrayal of elite rule found in Popper's political writings. Yet this did not stop Popper from being a committed democrat. To see why, we must follow Eidlin in distinguishing two moments of Popper's commitment to democracy.

One of these moments is, to be sure, decidedly unrealistic. Here, Popper assumes that democratic deliberation is exactly what Weissberg contends it is not: a Millian search for truth, a reasoned discussion in which, as in Popper's understanding of the scientific ideal, the discussants are so psychologically detached from their theories that they can contemplate their falsification with equanimity. This is a utopian ideal—if not in the hard sciences, then certainly in the social sciences and humanities, and even more definitely in politics. The tendency to identify oneself with one's ideas and defend them to the death is all too human; the ability to fight off this tendency, so that evidence or argument may defeat one's ideas, is what distinguishes good scholarship from ideology. But if, sadly, one cannot even expect the scholarly ideal to prevail in real-world universities,

one certainly cannot expect it to prevail in politics, where so much more is at stake.

Popper's notion that democratic politics can be a process of piecemeal social reform that conforms to falsificationist canons overlooks not only people's aversion to admitting error, but the complexity of modern politics and the ignorance of the public. If indeed political complexity makes ideology useful even for the relatively well-informed (the "social engineers"), then the policy dialogue among them, which in turn influences public opinion, is highly unlikely to take sufficient account of the failure of previous piecemeal steps, and inappropriate policies are likely to continue until either (a) they result in disasters so inescapable that even the most ill-informed members of the public take notice, or (b) they are fortuitously reversed by the chance election of a party with different or conflicting priorities.

These two possibilities are expressed in the other moment in Popper's defense of democracy, which seems to be derived less from his falsificationism than from his melioristic Enlightenment politics. Here Popper's idea is that as blind as democracy is, it provides a measure of safety against the worst excesses of state power. Even the massively ignorant know misery when they see it, and even when they fail to discern its true sources, they can haphazardly try to address the problem, perhaps with some success, if they have the power to replace one set of rulers with another. No matter what the motivational or epistemic deficiencies of elites, democracy can rectify them by cashiering the government.

As powerful as Popper's realist[1] defense of democracy is, however, one wonders if it is not only distinct from, but at odds with, the other, utopian side of his politics—which encourages a multiplication of state responsibilities, increasing the ignorance of the governing elite about the tasks the state has set itself. If complexity is what leads to the ideological spirit—surely the very opposite of the fallibilist, empiricist attitude Popper wants to encourage—would it not be better to simplify politics by limiting the functions of the state than to complicate it by encouraging social reform? If the better part of wisdom is awareness of one's ignorance, the omnicompetent state encourages foolishness, since it demands that its citizens have "attitudes" about everything. If Converse suggests that rule by elites is no great improvement over rule by the people, and if Popper's realism implies that even elite rule checked by popular approval is

unlikely to result in rational policy making, perhaps there is a third alternative—rule by nobody—that would address the problems of the other two.

Part of the allure of libertarianism is the promise of abolishing or severely limiting politics. This idea, and its counterpart, that of a self-propelling and self-regulating market, suffer from serious normative and empirical defects, but they are born of a rather sophisticated appreciation of the pitfalls of the political alternatives. These problems fall into two categories: not only the erroneous policies into which ideological elites are likely to be led, but the intrinsic disagreeability of ideological disputes, the degrading character of mass political pandering and demagoguery, the censorious, conformist contentiousness that marks democratic culture.

Ranged against the personal unpleasantness of democracy, however, are the psychologically invigorating qualities that have been associated with it since Tocqueville, to which Thomas Bender appeals below. For every critic of democracy's discomforts there is a poet of its joys—a Whitman, Emerson, or Thoreau. The libertarian may be able to accommodate such enthusiasts of democracy, however, by conceding the need for equality of respect and communal cooperation without granting the desirability of deciding contentious debates over large questions in mythical marketplaces of ideas. The self-confident vigor attendant on community involvement, the libertarian might argue, is more likely a function of participating as an equal in a common endeavor than of competing for the control of the levers of power. In this view, it is when we contribute to a shared end that we gain the psychological benefits of democracy, but it is when we have to contend with each other over the end, or over the best means of achieving it, that we incur its debilitating costs.

If there is anything to this view, then voting and majority rule may be quite tangential features of what made New England democracy so attractive; if anything, what distinguished it from its ugly modern counterpart was that, being fundamentally consensual, it avoided the ideological conflict that festers in conditions of complexity, hence ignorance. Accordingly, if Bender's dream of community empowerment is not to turn into a nightmare of dogmatic combat, it would involve the dispersal of limited power to communities defined not by majority rule, but by consensus around discrete, relatively unambiguous tasks to be accomplished; it would

avoid efforts to solve social problems of a size or difficulty that defied local comprehension, and which thus invite mass apathy and elite ideology.

One difficulty with this form of democracy is practical: how could consensual communities work under modern conditions? Another problem is conceptual. Doing away with politics is, in an important sense, an illusion. Matters that are excluded from "political" disputation because they are kept off the state's agenda are matters that are being dealt with in some other fashion. In a "politics-free" world, they are dealt with by commercial or "consensual" transactions that presuppose at least a tacit political decision to distribute power and resources in certain ways rather than others.[2] This objection appears fatal to any form of "depoliticization" that has pretenses of neutrality among goods or individuals.

But the questions raised by democratic ignorance need not be answered by appealing to a nonexistent neutral or "free" market or consensus. What is signified by communal consensus is not the *voluntary* or independently just basis of the property distribution upon which it rests, but merely the absence of serious interpersonal disagreement that would lead us back to the Conversian world of ignorance and ideology. Ideological politics is conceived as undesirable because of its negative consequences, and a just order is then defined as one that avoids such politics.

Our evaluation of such an order will depend, therefore, on at least three factors. First, is it feasible? Second, what are its comparative interpersonal advantages over majority-rule, conflictual, and limitless democracy? Third, what are its instrumental advantages? The third question brings us back to the fact that mass nonattitudes, indifference, and volatility, and elite ideological rigidity, are all marks of ignorance—which suggests that the policies adopted by mass democracies are likely to be ineffective, at best. Yet it is hardly a foregone conclusion that the policies "adopted" by markets or consensual communities will be any better. To make this comparison, one needs not only traditional economics research into the comparative efficiency of free-market and interventionist regimes, but a clear sense of the ends likely to be promoted by them, coupled with judgments about which ends are desirable.

It is to these projects that Greg Hill and Charles L. Griswold, Jr., contribute in this issue. Hill rebuts traditional moral defenses of capitalism by showing how Keynes undermined their empirical

bases. (In our next issue, Hill and Steven Horwitz will debate whether Keynes's account of the empirical nature of capitalism was accurate.) This continues a long line of discussion in these pages, notably including vol. 3, nos. 3–4 (on Keynesianism) and vol. 8, no. 3 (on the interpretation of Keynes). Griswold treats happiness as an important good and attempts to tie it to philosophical reflection. This furthers a discussion of more recent origin: in vol. 8, no. 4, the question of whether consumer capitalism promotes happiness was vigorously debated; in vol. 9, no. 4, articles by Robert Edgerton and Alexandra Maryanski on the anthropology of human nature compared modern society against the form of life human beings evolved to find satisfying; and in vol. 10, no. 4, we will mark the twentieth anniversary of the publication of Tibor Scitovsky's *The Joyless Economy* with a discussion of his controversial views about the compatibility of capitalist economies with psychological gratification.

NOTES

1. An *ultrarealist* view, however, would question the extent to which popular control is adequate even to the limited purpose Popper, in his realistic moment, assigns it. Such a view would draw on neo-Weberian state theory, which underscores the autonomy of bureaucratic elites, to show that even when the public does cashier political elites, bureaucracies may be able to continue as before. See, e.g., Evans et al. 1985.
2. The distinction between consensus and disagreement may solve the problem of defining "voluntary" social action in a way that is not viciously circular. The legal circumscription of individuals' and communities' rights and privileges renders any extra-legal, naturalistic definition of "voluntary" social action highly suspect, since it must be parasitic on a set of property rights that is coercively enforced. There is no quality of voluntariness that is not reducible to the coercive legal background. Thus, the voluntary/coercive dichotomy merely reiterates the legal order, narrowly focusing on the islands of choice while ignoring the ocean of constraint around them. Looked at from psychological and instrumental points of view, however, the voluntary/coercive dichotomy may be mapped onto the distinction in the text between joint activities in which the participants are treated as equals but need not engage in (ideological) conflict, and those in which *overt* interpersonal conflict is endemic. Among the latter may be both activities among equals in situations where complexity frustrates consensus, and activities within hierarchical organizations, where conflicting goals require the subordination of some people's purposes to others'. These last two cate-

gories of interpersonal relationship differ from "voluntary" or consensual relationships in a way that is independent of the legal background; it is their conflictual nature that contrasts against activities in which cooperation is "voluntary" because consensual.

REFERENCES

Campbell, Angus, Philip Converse, Warren Miller, and Donald Stokes. 1960. *The American Voter.* New York: Wiley.

Converse, Philip E. 1964. "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics." In *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter. New York: Free Press.

Evans, Peter B., Dietrich Rueschemeyer, and Theda Skocpol. 1985. *Bringing the State Back In.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Halverson, John. "Plato's Republic and Ours." *Critical Review* 5(4): 453–73.

Lazarsfeld, Paul, Bernard Berelson, and Hazel Gauden. 1948. *The People's Choice.* 2nd ed. New York: Columbia University Press.

Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion.* New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Lippmann, Walter. 1925. *The Phantom Public.* New York: Harcourt, Brace.

Page, Benjamin I., and Robert Y. Shapiro. 1992. *The Rational Public.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Page, Benjamin I., Robert Y. Shapiro, and Glenn R. Dempsey. 1987. "What Moves Public Opinion?" *American Political Science Review* 81(1): 23–43.

Stimson, James. 1991. *Public Opinion in America.* Boulder, Colo.: Westview.

Zaller, John. 1992. *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.