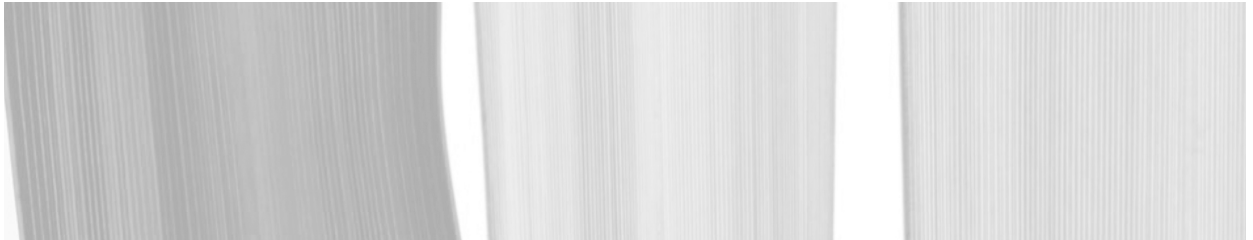


PART I

History, Philosophy of Public Opinion and Public Opinion Research



Section 1

The Nature of Public Opinion



The Public and Public Opinion in Political Theories

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The origins of our modern conception of public opinion are usually traced to liberal democratic theories of the eighteenth century, with precursors reaching all the way back to ancient Greece (Palmer, 1936). And yet the connections between empirical public opinion research and political theory have been remarkably loose. Despite the encouragement of leading researchers such as Berelson (1952), Lazarsfeld (1957), and Noelle-Neumann (1979), public opinion researchers have only recently taken up the task of trying to integrate empirical and philosophical models (e.g., Herbst, 1993; Price & Neijens, 1997; Althaus, 2006).

This chapter explores some fundamental connections between public opinion research and democratic theories, with several interrelated aims: (a) illustrating briefly the historical span of democratic theories and the wide range of views they adopt with respect to citizens, publics, public opinion and governance; (b) considering some of the normative models implicit in public opinion research; and (c) exploring some of the enduring theoretical tensions, dialectics, and debates that empirical

research might conceivably help to inform, if not resolve.¹ In view of a general model of democracy as collective decision making, this chapter considers the variable sorts of expectations democratic theories harbor for political leaders, news media, publics, and citizens.

ENTWINED CONCEPTS: PUBLIC, OPINION AND DEMOCRACY

The concept of public opinion emerged during the Enlightenment, but the separate concepts of the *public* and *opinion* have much older histories, each with a range of meanings that continue to inform their use to the present day (Price, 1992). *Opinion* was used primarily in two ways. In an epistemological sense, opinion indicated a particular and to some extent inferior way of knowing, distinguishing a matter of judgment (an “opinion”) from a matter known as fact or asserted on faith. In a second sense, the term was used to indicate regard, esteem, or reputation (as in holding a high opinion of someone). Both senses relate

to the notion of judgment, though in the one case the emphasis is on the uncertain truth-value of something believed, whereas in the other the emphasis is on a moral dimension of judgment, that is, approval or censure. As we shall see, political theories variously seize upon one or the other of these senses of “opinion,” at times emphasizing cognition and knowledge and at others moral sensibility or sentiment. The term *public*, from the Latin *publicus* meaning “the people,” similarly had several discernable meanings. In some of its earliest uses it referred to common access, with areas open to the general population deemed public (Habermas, 1962/1989). In a second usage, public referred to the common interest and common good, not in the sense of access (or belonging to) but rather in the sense of representing (that is, in the name of) the whole of the people. Thus the monarch under the theory of royal absolutism was the sole public figure, representing by divine right the entirety of the kingdom in his person (Baker, 1990).

The compound concept *public opinion* came into widespread use only in the eighteenth century and as the product of several significant historical trends, primarily the growth of literacy, expansion of the merchant classes, the Protestant Reformation, and the circulation of literature enabled by the printing press. An ascendant class of literate and well-read European merchants, congregating in new popular institutions such as *salons* and coffee houses and emboldened by new liberal philosophies arguing for basic individual freedoms, began to articulate a critique of royal absolutism and to assert their interests in political affairs (Habermas, 1962/1989). In early usage, public opinion referred to the social customs and manners of this growing class of prosperous “men of letters” but by the close of the century it was being used in an expressly political context, often in conjunction with cousin phrases such as “common will,” and “public conscience.” Baker (1990) argues that with the dissolution of absolute monarchical power, both the crown and its opponents alike invoked public opinion as a new source of authority and

legitimacy, largely in rhetorical fashion and without any fixed sociological referent. Hence the term remained, in some sense intentionally, vague. It was linked quite explicitly with free and open discussion of political affairs among educated men of financial means. Yet it often acquired (as in the writings of Rousseau, 1762/1968) an abstract and almost super-human quality as an expression of the common will, divined through reasoned debate, and framed as a powerful new tribunal for checking and thus controlling, as right would have it, the actions of the state.

Despite these communitarian origins, however, the concept of public opinion came to acquire much of its contemporary meaning from its deployment in the work of later liberal thinkers, particularly “utilitarian” philosophers such as Mill (1820/1937) and Bentham (1838/1962). While continuing to argue for full publicity of government affairs and strongly advocating freedom of expression, these analysts saw the polity less as the coming together of separate minds reasoning together toward a shared, common will than as a collection of individuals attempting to maximize their own interests and utilities. The harmonization of these conflicting interests was best achieved not through public reasoning to any consensual conclusion, but instead through rule by majority, requiring regular election and plebiscite, with the state functioning as a referee to individuals and groups vying to achieve their economic and political ends. “A key proposition,” writes Held (1996, p. 95), “was that the collective good could be realized only if individuals interacted in competitive exchanges pursuing their utility with minimal state interference.” Thus public opinion was wedded to the liberal idea of an unregulated “marketplace of ideas,” with the majority view, ascertained through a free popular vote, as its operational definition.

The early development and use of the concept of public opinion, then, were part and parcel of the Enlightenment project to replace European monarchies with civil democracies. What the Enlightenment accomplished, according to Peters (1995), was to transform

the classical assembly of the people—in Athenian democracy a physical, face-to-face forum—into a mass-mediated, fictive body constituted by newspapers bringing people together, not in physical space but in shared stories and conversations at a distance. “The imagined public is not, however, *imaginary*: in acting upon symbolic representations of ‘the public’ the public can come to exist as a real actor” (p. 16). Implicitly, notions of the public and public opinion followed the complete arc of thinking about just what forms such “imagined assemblies” might take, from highly communitarian formulations of the public as a fluid and amorphous group of freely associating citizens willing to think and debate in consideration of the good of the whole community, to highly individualist formulations equating it with the mass of citizens freely pursuing their personal and group interests as they wished, and by majority vote aggregating those interests to choose wise political leaders.

NOT ONE, BUT MANY, DEMOCRATIC THEORIES

Despite references to “democratic theory” and “classical democratic theory” that imply some sort of unified conception of democracy, writings on the subject offer myriad competing models. Indeed, while democracy is generally held to mean “rule by the people,” there has been historically some dispute over the definition of “the people,” and, even more so, over just what it means for them to “rule” (Lively, 1975). Held’s (1996) review identifies no fewer than a dozen variations. He describes four basic models, appearing roughly in chronological order—fifth-century *Athenian democracy*, with its sovereign assembly of the whole citizenry; *republicanism*, from its Roman and Italian Renaissance manifestations through the Enlightenment conceptions of Rousseau; eighteenth- and nineteenth-century *liberal democracy*, with its commitment to individual rights and electoral representation; and Marxist models

of *direct democracy*, predicated on complete economic and political equality.

These were then supplemented and expanded by twentieth-century models, drawing in various ways upon all four basic formulations but principally from the republican and liberal traditions (Habermas, 1966). Among these are theories Held (1996) names *competitive elitism*, *neopluralism*, *legal democracy* and *participatory democracy*. Each in various ways resulted from grappling with perceived problems of the public in the face of modern industrial life. These perceived ailments of the body politic included: a poorly informed and emotional mass citizenry subject to demagoguery and manipulation; widening inequalities in private economic, and hence political, power; expanding centralization of government and bureaucratic regulation; a growing and pervasive lack of citizen concern for the collective welfare; and the political withdrawal of citizens who feel inefficacious and effectively disenfranchised.

Worry over the emotionality and irrationality of ordinary citizens, and a near complete lack of confidence in their ability to discriminate intelligently among various policies, led some democratic theorists to fear that catering to a “popular will” would prove at the least inefficient and at the worst disastrously unstable, particularly in times of cultural and political stress. Contemplating a complex industrial world that had collapsed into international confusion and warfare, and despairing any hope of wisdom in popular democracy, both Lippmann (1922) and Schumpeter (1942) argued that an independent, expert bureaucracy was needed to aid elected representatives in formulating and administering intelligent public policy, and also that public influence on policy matters should be strictly limited. In making the case for a “leadership democracy” or “*competitive elitism*,” Schumpeter (1942, p. 269) proposed that citizens’ choices should extend only to periodic selection of “the men who are able to do the deciding.” Lippmann (1922, p. 32) argued that expert advisors with unrestricted access to

information should make the “unseen facts” intelligible to political decisions makers and “organize public opinion” for the press and the citizenry.

Such minimalist conceptions of democracy equate it with any system offering competitive elections, often placing considerable distance between the decisions of governing elites and the desires of the masses. *Pluralist* formulations, which became ascendant in American political science in the 1950s and 1960s, accept many of the minimalists’ views of citizens but emphasize the role of intermediary interest groups and quasi-elite “issue publics” in maintaining a competitive balance of power and providing a critical “linkage” function in tying popular wishes to governmental decisions. Analysts including Almond (1950) and Key (1961) invoked the concept of “issue publics” (or “special publics”) to explain how policy in democratic societies can, despite wide swaths of inattention and ignorance in the citizenry, nevertheless respond to public opinion in a fairly rational manner. It stands to reason that, because politics routinely gives way to more pressing matters of family, work and recreation, people should focus their attention on just a few matters of the most direct interest and importance. Nonetheless, for most issues at least a segment of the population is aroused and interested enough to learn, discuss and form opinions. Issue publics represent the small, policy-oriented segments within the mass polity that attend to particular problems, engage their political leaders and the media over these issues, and demand some degree of elite responsiveness and accountability. Elections by themselves do not ensure a stable and publicly responsive democratic state; rather, it is a multiplicity of contending minority interests, which, in pressing their claims, are able to bargain for policy accommodations. Hence modern democracies, at least those offering relatively open electoral systems and guarantees of civil liberties that protect contending minority interests, are “polyarchies” (Dahl, 1971), where political power is effectively disaggregated and where specific policies are—unlike in the elite

model proposed by Schumpeter—anchored to popular wishes through politically active segments of the citizenry (Held, 1996).

Pluralist conceptions of disaggregated and in some sense “fairly” distributed power in society were challenged by many. Some critics cast the model as elevating a descriptive account of contemporary Western democracies to the status of a normative theory, and in so doing enshrining the *status quo*. Others (e.g., Pateman, 1970) argued that social, financial and political resources, including knowledge and efficacy, are so maldistributed in the population that many groups in society lack the ability to mobilize. Assumptions made by liberal theory that people are “free and equal,” argued Pateman, do not square with actual social and economic disparities, which effectively undermine any formal guarantees of equal rights. True democracy requires that such inequities be ameliorated, and that the active participation of all segments of society be fostered in democratic institutions of all kinds, which must be fully open and publicly accountable (Barber, 1984).

Participatory democratic theorists argue, drawing upon the communitarian notions of Rousseau and other “developmental republicans,” that political autonomy arises from collective engagement in political action and discussion. As Dewey (1927, p. 208) had earlier proposed in rebutting Lippman’s (1922) withering attack on citizens, “the essential need [is] improvement in the methods and conditions of debate, discussion, and persuasion.” The problem, many writers submit, is that the mass media transform politics into a kind of spectator sport. Opinion polls and popular referenda, despite their democratic aims, merely amplify defective opinions formed without any meaningful public debate. The result is a citizenry converted into a body that *consumes* political views disseminated by elites through the mass media, rather than an autonomous, deliberating body that *discovers* its own views through conversation. The sovereign, reasoning public is displaced by a mass audience assembled around political spectacle (Mills, 1956; Habermas, 1962/1989).

These conditions, however, are not viewed as inevitable. Were people more broadly empowered, this line of argument runs, they would become politically transformed: “they would become more public-spirited, more knowledgeable, more attentive to the interests of others, and more probing of their own interests” (Warren, 1992, p. 8). The act of deliberating, in many treatments (e.g., Gutmann & Thompson, 1996) is thought to be especially transformative: it fosters mutual respect and trust, leads to a heightened sense of one’s value as part of an active political community, and stimulates additional forays into political engagement. The presumed value of discussion in stimulating and engaging the citizenry has thus figured heavily in recent proposals for revitalizing the modern electorate. Participatory democratic theory in general and “deliberative democracy” theories in particular have emerged in tandem with a multi-faceted critique of contemporary social and political life (e.g., Fishkin, 1991).

Participatory democratic theory is countered by another contemporary trend in political philosophy that draws its inspiration not from classical republican and communitarian notions but instead from democratic theory’s liberal foundations. Much of the emphasis in liberal democratic theory has to do with delineating the rights of the citizen against the state, and balancing and distributing power to avoid its untoward concentration of power in the hands of any single actor or alignment of actors. Proponents of *legal democracy* (e.g., Hayek, 1979), who are sometimes called neo-liberals, view state efforts to ameliorate social inequities as inevitably coercive and likely to come at the expense of individual liberty. In this view, democracy is valuable primarily in its protection of individual liberty; and the more expansive the state, the larger its legislative and bureaucratic reach, the more grave the dangers to freedom. The potentially coercive powers of the state must consequently be highly circumscribed by the rule of law. The most legitimate means of collective choice and—thus the basis for any genuinely liberal society, legal democrats argue—is the free-market; and this mechanism operates

best when unencumbered by government intervention and regulation (e.g., Friedman, 1962).

Twentieth-century models of democracy have thus moved beyond classical notions in grappling with ever more complex industrial and corporate societies; yet they continue to range from the highly communitarian to the highly individualistic in their conceptions of the public and public opinion, drawing freely from several centuries of philosophical inquiry. “Democratic theory is in a state of flux,” writes Held (1996, p. 231), “There are almost as many differences among thinkers within each of the major strands of political analysis as there are among the traditions themselves.” As Price (1992, p. 2) has noted, connecting the concepts *public* and *opinion* represented an attempt by liberal democratic philosophy to unite the “one” and the “many,” to devise ways of producing coordinated, collective action out of disparate and conflicting individual choices. It did so by turning to the idea of democracy, that is, collective decision making through discussion and debate among members of the citizenry, under conditions of openness and fairness. Yet the particular mechanisms of decision making proposed by democratic theorists have always varied widely.

DEMOCRACY AS COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING

A useful matrix for conceptualizing the complex, temporally extended process of collective decision making was proposed by Price and Neijens (1997). Their matrix serves our particular purposes here by illustrating and summarizing a very wide range of possible collective decision-making processes, and myriad roles the public might play.

Price and Neijens note general similarities between traditional models of the stages through which public opinion develops (e.g., in the work of Bryce, 1888) and the phases of decision making later adopted by decision analysts and policy researchers. Five main phases of collective decision making can

be distilled. First is the process of *eliciting values*, sometimes called the “problem” stage, which involves recognizing a matter of collective worry or concern, and then articulating various goals thought to be important in addressing the issue. Next is a phase that involves *developing options* or proposals for resolving the problem, and sifting these down into a small set of potentially viable alternatives. Once these have been developed, decision makers turn to *estimating consequences* of selecting one over another option, a task that often falls to technical and policy experts. The fourth stage involves *evaluating the alternatives*, with advocates of competing options actively engaged in persuasive appeals aimed at garnering both public and elite support, and the issue typically receiving broad media attention through news coverage and opinion polling. This public debate ultimately leads to the *making of a decision*, either through bureaucratic or governmental action or in some cases by electoral choice.

The Price and Neijens decision matrix crosses each of these five stages with six different groups of actors in a democratic society who may be implicated to varying degrees at any particular phase of the process: political

leaders, technical experts, interest groups, the journalistic community, attentive publics and much larger mass audiences (see Figure 1.1). Political leaders, policy experts and interest groups comprise the political “elites,” both within and outside the sphere of formal government, who play active roles throughout all phases of decision making. Members of the press serve as critical conduits for information and opinion exchange between these elites, their followers in attentive publics, and much larger mass audiences.

Large-scale, democratic choices are especially complicated—due not only to the interactive engagements of each of these myriad groups, but also because the process does not necessarily unfold in any neatly linear fashion. It is often a rather ambiguous and politically-charged affair, far less rational than the formal stage-model would imply. While the model suggests that the discovery of problems gives rise to solutions, for example, Price and Neijens (1997) note that the entire process can be turned on its head when interest groups or political leaders adhere to ideologically favored political “solutions” and merely lie in wait opportunistically for the right “problems” to which they can readily be applied to appear on the scene. Despite these

	Elicitation of goals/ values	Development of options	Estimation of consequences	Evaluation of options	Decision
Political leaders					
Technical experts					
Interest groups					
Reporters and editors					
Attentive publics					
Mass audiences					

Figure 1.1 The collective decision-making process—matrix of phases and participants. Reproduced from Price and Neijens (1997, p. 342) with permission from Oxford University Press and the World Association for Public Opinion Research

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complications, the matrix helps to summarize the full range of possible interactions that might potentially feed into decisions made by democratic states. It also visually reinforces two main dimensions underlying differing conceptions of democratic decision making.

Elite/mass relationships

Comparisons of activities across the vertical dimension of the matrix—from political leaders and technical policy experts at the top to mass audiences at the bottom—capture the relative degree to which the process is “top-down” or “bottom-up” in nature. At one end of the theoretical spectrum, elite models of democracy propose that collective decision making unfolds best when it is largely technocratic, with elected leaders and expert policy advisors deciding the relevant course of collective action and then organizing public opinion for the masses (a position embraced as noted above by Lippmann, 1922, in view of what he considered irremediable deficiencies in both the public and the press, for which he saw little hope). At the other end of the spectrum are models of direct or participatory democracy. More communitarian in spirit, as suggested earlier, they advocate a strong and engaged role for ordinary citizens across all phases of the collective decision-making process (e.g., Pateman, 1970). All seek some sort of “linkage” from top to bottom (or bottom to top); but the degree of looseness of the linkages desired and the preferred means by which they are to be achieved is quite variable.

The nature of mass involvement

Comparisons of activities across the horizontal dimension of the matrix—from elicitation of goals and values, to developing options, estimating consequences, evaluating options, and finally deciding a course of action—capture the relative degree to which the process attempts to respond to general popular views about desirable end states, on the one hand, or aims at soliciting far more focused public evaluations of policy alternatives on

the other. A number of democratic theories—while placing most of the burden for developing, debating, and evaluating policy options on elite political leaders, experts, and interest groups—nonetheless propose that ordinary citizens should play critical roles in conveying, if not highly directive views on specific policies, at least general signals of popular values and desires. “Minimal” democratic models view periodic selection and removal of political leaders as a sufficient means of public participation. Other theories argue for the more regular and substantial involvement of ordinary citizens, for instance through referenda on specific policy actions (a primary role advocated for public opinion polls by Gallup & Rae, 1940). Different political theories, then, seize upon one or the other of the two traditional senses of opinion discussed above: Some seek citizens’ knowledgeable contributions (their informed preferences for particular policies), while others seek merely to ground elite decision making in popular moral sensibilities or broad judgments related to a governing regime’s overall success in meeting the citizens’ basic needs. Some ask the public to think carefully about exactly what the government is doing; others are more concerned with leaders’ legitimate public standing (“opinion” here equated with popular regard or reputation).

Various democratic theories, then, place a range of expectations and demands on the shoulders of citizens. They range from relatively top-down or “weak” forms of democracy to bottom-up, “strong” forms (Barber, 1984); and they range from models positing that ordinary citizens are best consulted by seeking diffuse judgments of satisfaction with elite performance to models that seek much more direct and detailed public input on the substance of pressing policy questions.

Polls as policy referenda

Implicit in contemporary understandings of public opinion and opinion polling, Price and Neijens (1997) and Althaus (2006) submit, is a particular decision-making model.

Mass audiences enter the process at the evaluation phase, during which time they follow elite debate over a limited number of options and are asked, via polling, to register opinions as to which they prefer. However, this informal “policy referendum” model can be seen as problematic, even contradictory (Althaus, 2006). If members of the mass audience have no engagement in the process until they are asked their opinions at the evaluation phase, then it places quite heavy and perhaps unreasonable burdens on the press to inform their previously (perhaps habitually) unengaged audiences at this juncture. Even assuming these burdens are met, the capacity for sovereign citizen judgments may be heavily circumscribed, both because they have at their disposal little or no knowledge of alternatives that were considered and rejected (or indeed not considered) by elites, and because they are unlikely to fathom the consequences of various options (aside from whatever can be gleaned from political contestants as they attempt to recruit supporters for their side; Price & Neijens, 1997).

The decision-making matrix suggests at least two potential remedies to this problem, each consistent with a rather different normative-theoretical approach to democracy. Despairing of any expectation for intelligent mass contributions at the evaluation stage, one might shift the focus of mass engagement to the very first, problem-oriented phase of decision making. Citizens may not be competent to judge the intricacies of policy, this line of reasoning goes, but they may be fully capable of telling elite decision makers what bothers them, what needs policy attention, and what they most desire in terms of collective outputs. Such a model emphasizes public agenda setting over the monitoring of policy alternatives. Alternatively, one might propose, as do deliberative theorists, that ordinary citizens *would be* fully capable of rendering intelligent judgments, if only they enjoyed a different communication apparatus for doing so and were not hamstrung by the conventional press and

polling model as presently institutionalized. Hence the “deliberative poll,” which seeks to unite the mass-representative capabilities of probability sampling with something very like the Athenian assembly (Fishkin, 1991), along with related notions of citizen juries, shadow assemblies, and the like.

The omniscient straw man

A theme running throughout our discussion deserves to be stated explicitly at this juncture. Empirical opinion research in the twentieth century—though often framed as rebutting classical democratic theory—in fact bore out the low expectations of most pre-empirical theorists, documenting the shallow diffusion of political information across the electorate, low levels of popular political knowledge, and the tendency of mass belief systems to exhibit poorly integrated or weakly “constrained” opinions across different issues (Converse, 1964). Contrary to many claims that “classical” democratic theory called for omniscient citizens, however, the majority of social-philosophical writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries largely eschewed any expectation that many ordinary people would bother to spend more than a modest amount of time thinking about politics and public policy (Pateman, 1970). As Bryce (1888) and others had long suggested, most people, most of the time, are weakly if at all engaged in political issues of the day. Schudson (1998), after examining models of citizenship over the course of American history, argues that the ideal of an informed citizen is actually the product of early twentieth century progressive thought. So empirical renderings of citizen ignorance, if they indeed undercut a “classical” theory, may actually address a relatively recent one (hypostasizing Lippmann’s critique of contemporary American progressive hopes as a critique of “democratic theory”). Althaus (2006) sums up the matter by pointing to two “false starts” in public opinion research: the idea that opinion surveys are best used to assess government policies, and

the idea that popular disinterest in politics is a grave and unanticipated problem for democratic rule.

RESEARCHING COLLECTIVE DECISION MAKING

It would be difficult at this point to conclude that empirical public opinion research has convincingly overturned any particular democratic theory. It has arguably helped, however, to refine various concepts, and has at times called certain philosophical-theoretical assumptions into question. Significant amounts of survey research have accumulated, for example, detailing the nature of mass political engagement (e.g., Verba, Scholzman, & Brady, 1995) and the diffusion of political information, (e.g., Delli-Carpini & Keeter, 1996). This work highlights important inequities in both knowledge and participation, offers clues as to their origins, and considers various ramifications for democratic practice. As Held (1996, chap. 6) recounts, survey research in America and Britain proved central in early arguments supporting pluralistic democratic theory, but also, as it turned out, provided evidence of the broad socio-economic inequalities and cultural chasms in political resources marshaled by critics of the pluralistic model.

A full, perhaps even a satisfying integration of empirical opinion research with democratic theory is beyond the scope of this chapter. Still, as a way of concluding our discussion, we can paint in broad strokes a few of the key ways empirical studies and democratic theories might profitably inform each other.

The empirical contours of "opinion"

Price (1992) notes that while some sociologists adopted an organic, discursive model of public opinion more or less aligned with republican theory, developments in attitude measurement and survey research

techniques in the 1920s and 1930s deflected public opinion research onto a much more individualistic trajectory. This trajectory has proved occasionally contentious (most notably when Blumer in 1948 attacked the field for having entirely missed the mark); however, the operational definition of public opinion as the aggregated attitudes of a population gained wide, indeed nearly universal acceptance. At any rate, in pursuing the study of individual attitudes and opinions over a half century, the field has inarguably accumulated a considerably refined understanding of both.

Many of the most profound developments have been methodological in origin. In the early days of opinion research, pollsters tended to view instabilities and inaccuracies in survey responses as mere artifacts of measurement (Sudman & Bradburn, 1974). However, a shift toward more theoretically oriented research in opinion measurement, which began in the late 1970s, led to an understanding that many variations in survey responses were far from random. Over the past few decades, research has tried to develop comprehensive models of the way people respond to survey questions, drawing heavily from theories of cognitive processing (→*Designing effective and valid questionnaires*; →*Psychology of survey responses*). The clear trend has been to interpret opinion responses, not as self-evidently interpretable, but in light of how respondents react to wording or context changes, how they respond to rhetorical manipulations, how they are influenced by social perceptions, and how the responses vary across groups in the population. There has also been conceptual clarification of the *range* of phenomena relevant to opinion expression, with researchers examining not only opinions (e.g., preferences related to policy matters or public officials), but also broad underlying values and attitudes, beliefs, perceptions of groups, and the complex relationships among these (→*Different concepts of opinions and attitudes*; →*Identifying value clusters in societies*).

In any democratic decision-making process one can imagine, the public's opinions must at some point be gathered. Empirical research offers extensive guidance, far beyond anything speculation might offer, on *how to ask*. However, empirical research does not, in and of itself, offer any guidance on *what to ask*. That is properly the role of democratic theory which, in return for technical guidance, can offer the field some normative direction—in emphasizing, say, expressions of basic wants and desires, or demands for elite action on problems seen as pressing, over the usual “approval voting” on policies of the day (Althaus, 2003).

The Internet may presage another important development for public opinion research. Despite continuous methodological improvements, survey research has generally consisted of randomly sampled, one-on-one, respondent-to-interviewer interactions aimed at extracting pre-coded answers or short verbal responses. Web-based technologies, however, may now permit randomly constituted *respondent-with-respondent group conversations* integrating general-population survey methods and focus-group techniques (Price, 2003). The conceptual fit between such conversations and the phenomenon of public opinion, itself grounded in popular discussion, renders it theoretically quite appealing (→*The internet as a new platform for expressing opinions/a new kind of public sphere*).

The empirical contours of “the public”

Although sublimated, the concepts of public opinion as an emergent product of widespread discussion, and of the public as a dynamic group constituted by the give-and-take of debate and deliberation, have never been entirely absent from public opinion research. Early scientific analysts, most prominently Allport (1937), found the notion of public opinion as an emergent product of discussion difficult to grasp empirically and problematic in a number of respects, and hence came to accept mass survey data as the only workable empirical rendering of public opinion. Yet the

extent to which general population surveys themselves render a valid representation of the public has been questioned by scholars of many stripes. Opinions given to pollsters and survey researchers—often unorganized, disconnected, individual responses formed without the benefit of any debate—have indeed been called “pseudo” public opinion (Graber, 1982).

These debates echo enduring republican/liberal tensions in democratic theory, which has variously cast “the public” as one or another of any number of sociological entities: a complex of groups pressing for political action (i.e., interest groups); people engaged in debate over some issue; people who have thought about an issue and know enough to form opinions (whether or not they have been engaged in conversation or debate); groups of people who are following some issue in the media (i.e., audiences or attention aggregates); an electorate; an agglomeration of all citizens; the general population of some geopolitical entity; or even some imagined community in the minds of citizens. These varying conceptions implicate a number of empirical phenomena—conversations, the holding of opinions, media use, knowledge, participation, the perceived climate of opinion—as criterial attributes. And each of these phenomena has been studied, some of them quite extensively, in empirical research. In one way or another, normative theories will only make contact with public opinion research if we are able to *find* the public (or publics) as conceptualized in theory.

The study of public knowledge serves as a case in point, one that drives directly at issues of rationality and equity, and indirectly at how we define the public. Suppose we dismiss general-population survey results as expressing, not true public opinion, but instead rather thoughtless, lightly rooted “top-of-the-head” reactions to some issue. How would our reading of public opinion look if we confined “the public” to only knowledgeable citizens? Would it render a substantially different portrait of public preferences? Perhaps surprisingly, Page and Shapiro (1992)

argue “no.” Despite the relative incoherence of many sampled opinions, when survey data are aggregated they reveal essentially rational collective preferences, since most of the thoughtless “noise,” the flotsam and jetsam of mass pseudo opinions, ends up canceling out. Such collective rationality is reassuring to pollsters; however, it does not necessarily solve the problems arising from a large number of uninformed voters in the population (Delli-Carpini & Keeter, 1996; → *Studying elites vs. mass opinion*). Recently Althaus (2003) has demonstrated that, at least on some issues, systematic inequalities in knowledge distribution among groups in the population can distort even aggregate readings of public opinion. And because political knowledge is a resource (just like financial capital) that underwrites participation and facilitates mobilization, the implications of its distribution in society extend far beyond the impact on polling results. In pluralistic formulations of democratic decision making, government policies are linked to mass preferences through representative issue publics. Although they may vary in size and composition from issue to issue (Krosnick, 1990), issue publics may be drawn disproportionately from a generally well-educated, attentive and knowledgeable stratum of the population (at best one-fifth of the electorate at large, by most methods of accounting; see e.g., Delli-Carpini & Keeter, 1996). These are not just empirical lines of inquiry; they take on deep theoretical meaning when viewed through the prism of one or another model of democratic decision making. The public is a complex blending of “active” and “passive” segments, of “engaged” citizens and mere “spectators.” The size and representative composition of these segments, which surely changes across issues and over time, indexes in many ways the health of a democracy.

The empirical contours of “the citizen”

Implicit in any model of democracy is a model of the citizen: a set of assumptions

about what motivates him or her, about her cognitive capacities, about his behavioral tendencies. Here again we find significant opportunities for empirical research and democratic theory to inform one another, with the latter proposing what to look for, and the former serving to refine and correct theoretical assumptions.

Fundamental to the project of understanding citizens is some recognition that they are, in large part, products of their surrounding political culture. Consequently, understanding them requires two tasks: learning how they *are* at present, and learning how, under different conditions, they *might be*. A fitting illustration is provided by participatory democratic theory, developed as it was with the understanding that many citizens are poorly informed, politically apathetic and inefficacious, but also in the belief that these very people could be transformed through everyday democratic *praxis* into different and more productive citizens. In its deliberative variant, this theoretical model proposes that public discussion serves to broaden public perspectives, promote tolerance and understanding between groups with divergent interests, and generally encourage a public-spirited attitude.

Advocates of deliberative theory are presently legion, but its fundamental propositions are not without critics (e.g., Hibbing & Theiss-Morse, 2002), and they have been increasingly subjected to empirical scrutiny (e.g., Fishkin & Luskin, 1999; Mutz, 2006; Price, in press). Group discussion has, after all, been known to produce opinion polarization, shifts in new and risky directions, and other undesired outcomes. Disagreement may also be fundamentally uncomfortable for citizens, particularly those uncertain of their views and feeling ill-equipped to defend them. Some have argued that encouraging citizen discussion, despite its democratic intentions, will make reaching out to the disenfranchised, who tend to lack status and deliberative ability, even more difficult (Sanders, 1997). As deliberative theory is played out in actual practice and as empirical research accumulates, we should come to

better understand conditions of discussion that facilitate or retard democratic aims. Comparisons of citizen behavior across different contexts—local, national, and international—should also prove highly informative.

Empirical monitoring of collective decision making

There is another, perhaps even more important way in which public opinion research and democratic theory should intersect. Some 50 years ago, Hyman (1957) pointed out that opinion research tended to pursue, using sociologist Robert Merton's phrase, "theories of the middle range." While this strategy stood to produce useful and valuable psychological insights, Hyman opined, it had potential liabilities as well. "We may concentrate on the trivial rather than the important," Hyman worried, "We may even institutionalize the neglect of some important part of our ultimate larger theory" (p. 56). What was needed to avoid these problems, he suggested, was careful monitoring of large-scale social processes over time, with a focus on the relationship of popular thinking to governmental processes and policy outcomes.

In the terms adopted here, Hyman's call is for the monitoring over time of key cells in the decision-making matrix, as collective problems are first identified and addressed, and as decisions work their way through processes of social and political negotiation. Attention would be paid to the goals and interests of each of the participants identified by the matrix, with the aim of determining how—and indeed if—democratic mass–elite linkages occur. This is admittedly a tall order to fill. Yet here again, empirical public opinion research has been evolving in this direction, albeit not always with the explicit connections to democratic theories that it might have marshaled. Research on agenda setting, for example, though very often tethered to "middle-range" theoretical goals, has at times turned to big-picture questions and produced interesting examinations over time of the complex interactions of public,

press, and policy agendas. Some exemplary works in this tradition include the "agenda-building" research of Lang and Lang (1983), who examined the ways in which Watergate developed as a public issue through persistent elite efforts, constrained by political events and contemporary currents in mass opinion; or the series of detailed case studies conducted by Protesse and colleagues (1991), who studied the ways investigative journalists often collaborate with public policy makers to set a "public" reform agenda, in some instances apparently without much engagement of attentive publics or mass audiences.

Price and Neijens (1997) suggest a large number of collective "decision-quality" concerns that might be empirically examined in opinion research. These sorts of quality criteria—for example, the extent to which the problems addressed appear responsive to popular concerns, the extensiveness of popular discussion and debate, the degree to which those who are engaged represent the affected population, the generation of differing viewpoints on the problem at hand, the degree to which the consequences of chosen policies are clearly understood by the public, or the degree to which the process is perceived as fair and legitimate—all have import for the democratic character of the public opinion and policy making. Democratic theories construct various models of the way decision making ought to unfold, but empirical research is required to inform judgments about the way they actually unfold in practice.

This brief overview has necessarily taken a rather broad sweep at identifying some of the major lines of normative theoretical thinking that feed into modern opinion research, suggesting just a few of the ways empirical and philosophical inquiry might inform one another. Readers are encouraged, as they consider the many lines of study summarized elsewhere in this volume, to look for other useful connections to democratic theory not explored here. Finding and nurturing those connections should help an already vibrant field of research to become even more fruitful.

NOTE

1 Our review must of necessity be brief. Thorough reviews of political theory can be found, for instance, in Held (1996). For a review of the history of the concept of public opinion see Price (1992), Peters (1995), or Splichal (1999).

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