

Lapsed Memory? The Roots of American Public Opinion Research

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With the rise of the democratic state came a strong emphasis on "the public" or "public opinion" in the study of politics. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a number of important works examined the contours of public opinion within a democracy. The study of public opinion since this early period has only intensified. However, recent work on public opinion is problematic: the theoretical and normative concerns and the political/sociological focus of the early works on public opinion are largely missing. Most modern studies of public opinion are psychologically driven and often truncated from broad concerns of American politics and democratic theory. In this article, I explicate the history of public opinion research, paying particular attention to the "early" works and how their concerns and emphases have been neglected by many "later" studies of public opinion. Through this history I aim to highlight the differences between the early and later phases and to suggest that much was lost in neglecting the concerns of the early writers on public opinion. While some contemporary researchers are, in fact, harking back to the early work, I conclude that a more thorough re-acquaintance with the classics of public opinion is necessary.

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We talk of public opinion as a new force in the world, conspicuous only since governments began to be popular.

Lord Bryce, 1888¹

Although "public opinion" is a concept with a fairly long and rich history,² it became an integral component of political analysis only in the nineteenth century.

1. James Bryce, *The American Commonwealth*, Vol. 2 (New York: Macmillan and Co., 1888), 216.

2. See, for instance, Paul A. Palmer, "The Concept of Public Opinion in Political Theory," in *Essays in History and Political Theory: In Honor of Charles Howard McIlwain*, ed. Carl F. Wittke (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1936); David W. Minar, "Public Opinion in the Perspective of Political Theory," *Western Political Quarterly* 23 (1960): 31-44; and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

With the rise and stability of the democratic state (especially in the U.S.), commentators increasingly began to see "the public" or "public opinion" as an important and legitimate focus in the study of politics. The role and place of the public became key because democracies were supposed to represent and be accountable to their people. Consequently, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries one can note an influx, in the English-speaking world, of political works and treatises that expend considerable effort in mapping out and discussing the contours of public opinion within a democracy.

The study of public opinion since then has certainly not abated; to be sure, it has mushroomed. However, what is curious about more recent studies of public opinion (since around 1950) is that normative democratic concerns and systematic perspectives (characteristic of the early studies) are not nearly as prominent. Indeed, the contemporary study of public opinion is, to a significant degree, specialized and psychologically driven and is often truncated from the broad concerns of American politics and democratic theory.³

In the following essay, I will trace the history of the "modern" study of public opinion; that is, beginning in the late nineteenth century, when "governments began to be popular," as Bryce said. This history, as I have implied, can be roughly separated into two broad periods, an early period characterized by the prevalence of richly theoretical and political, sociological works and a later period that boasts a focus on the psychological aspects of opinion, which takes as its fundamental research tool the opinion poll (and its variants) and often eschews the normative and theoretical concerns of the earlier writers. Although I am far from alone in postulating distinctions between early and later "modern" studies of public opinion,⁴ this analysis is not simply another taxonomy: it also will be employed to chart and evaluate recent trends in public opinion research. There are encouraging, if moderate, signs that public opinion researchers are beginning again to look at public opinion in a more systematic and even normative manner, much like early students of public opinion. Contemporary public opinion research appears to be more attuned to the role of public opinion in the political process and not only concerned with the nature of mass or individual opinions extricated from this process. I will conclude by applauding guardedly this current trend and will thereby emphasize the continuing usefulness of the "classics" of public opinion and their broad-ranging analyses of public opinion and democratic governance.⁵

3. See Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Studying Substantive Democracy," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 27 (1994): 9-17 and Minar, "Public Opinion."

4. See, for example, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "Public Opinion and the Classical Tradition," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 39-53 and Michael Margolis, "Public Opinion, Polling, and Political Behavior," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 472 (1984): 61-71.

5. I would like to acknowledge an important debt to an incisive little volume by Vincent Price, *Public Opinion* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1992). This work was quite useful for developing some of the major theoretical insights in this essay. Furthermore, the survey works of Donald R. Kinder, "Diversity

I. Early Roots of Modern Public Opinion Research

A good place to begin our study of “early modern” commentators on public opinion is James Bryce’s *The American Commonwealth*, which was first published in 1888. Although the study could easily be commenced with John Stuart Mill or Alexis de Tocqueville (or even James Madison), Bryce’s work is really the first study to treat *comprehensively* public opinion as a crucial component in a democracy.⁶ This seminal work articulated various issues current at the time and also, in many respects, set the terms by which subsequent students would discourse on public opinion. Indeed, Bryce anticipated, sometimes in a quite eerie fashion, debates and problems that would inform later studies of public opinion. I will briefly outline the key aspects of his examination of public opinion in *The American Commonwealth* and then use this structure as a step toward discussing subsequent (primarily American) research on public opinion.

For Bryce, our modern world was teleologically bound to democracy, viz., he saw democracy, rule by the people, as the inevitable form that governments would assume in the modern era. For him, then, the public and especially “public opinion” were important concepts deserving of much attention. Not surprisingly, he expended considerable effort discussing the subject in *American Commonwealth*. Bryce focused on three major facets of public opinion: the competence of the public, the constitution of public opinion (individual- vs. group-based), and the relation of leaders to the mass (i.e., the role of public opinion in the political process).

First, Bryce considered the competence of the public in America. He noted the decided lack of interest that many Americans showed in politics, but he nevertheless concluded that the supposedly uninformed “humbler classes” have more often been proved to be right than the ostensibly higher classes of people.⁷ Although Bryce acknowledged that public opinion might occasionally be a rash and irrational force and that individuals might not be competent on all fronts, he made a distinction between “sentiment” and “thought.”⁸ Arguing that sentiment is much more important for political judgment than thought, and given that common people were generally of sound “sentiment,” he concluded that mass participation in the political process was nothing which should generate alarm.

Next, Bryce examined what one might call the “constitution of public opinion”; that is, he discussed the extent to which public opinion formation and expression

and Complexity in American Public Opinion,” in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline*, ed. Ada W. Finifter (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 1983) and Paul M. Sniderman, “The New Look in Public Opinion Research,” in *Political Science: The State of the Discipline II*, ed. Ada W. Finifter (Washington, DC: American Political Science Association, 1993) were also helpful for this conceptualization.

6. Harwood L. Childs, *Public Opinion: Nature, Formation, and Role* (Princeton, NJ: Van Nostrand, 1965), 30.

7. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 212, 213-14.

8. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 212-13.

were influenced by classes, groups, and leaders. What is interesting, however, and somewhat revolutionary in Bryce is that he was one of the first authors to routinely discuss public opinion in terms of the aggregation of *individual* opinions (similar to the aggregation of votes) rather than solely in terms of sociological and organic groupings. It is not that Bryce did not understand public opinion as partly an organic and group-driven process. Indeed, he was aware of the influence of church leaders, reformers, parties, and classes on the opinions of individuals.⁹ Rather, he conceived of public opinion as an individual phenomenon for normative reasons; he saw individualized public opinion as in keeping with democratic theory, viz., "one man, one vote." As will become evident later, Bryce's idealized conception of public opinion as the aggregation of individual opinions would become the dominant understanding of public opinion shortly after the introduction of the public opinion poll.

Another major aspect of this facet of public opinion that Bryce dealt with was the Tocquevillian problem of the tyranny of the majority. Bryce acknowledged that individuals were often influenced by majority sentiment; however, he chose to see the dominance of majority opinion as a "fatalism of the multitude" as opposed to Tocqueville's more vile "tyranny of the majority." Whereas Tocqueville thought that the reason individuals gave in to majority opinion was because they were afraid of the social derision and ostracism that would be the result of their objections, Bryce supposed that people generally considered the majority to be correct and that they thereby accommodated their opinions.¹⁰

Finally, Bryce discussed the influence of public opinion on the processes of government. This facet of public opinion seems to have been the most important for him. In introducing his analysis of public opinion, he said, "before I proceed to describe how it works upon the government of the nation and the States, it may be proper to consider briefly how it is formed, and what is the nature of the influence which it everywhere exercises upon government."¹¹ For Bryce it seemed most important to understand public opinion within the democratic political system, rather than simply apprehend public opinion *per se*.

Bryce was surely exaggerating when he said that "towering over Presidents and State governors, over Congress and State legislatures, over conventions and the vast machinery of party, public opinion stands out, in the United States, as the great source of power, the master of servants who tremble before it."¹² Yet, he generally believed that public opinion dominated American politics, prominently through the political parties. Moreover, he believed that public opinion in America *should* dominate the government. Not only would decision making be sound because of the

9. See, for instance, Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 255-67, for a discussion of the influence of classes on public opinion.

10. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 297-306.

11. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 209.

12. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 225.

solid "sentiment" of the public, but democracy prescribes this type of rule by public opinion. Indeed, strikingly anticipating the concept of the opinion poll, Bryce opined that the "fourth stage of democracy" would be reached when the means were developed to ascertain public opinion on every issue facing government.¹³

As we shall see, these facets of public opinion that Bryce examined were very much on the minds of later writers; he in many ways set the terms for subsequent discussions.¹⁴ To reiterate, Bryce considered the public's competence, the constitution of public opinion, and the role of public opinion in the political process or, in other words, the leader/public nexus. What is more, he considered these issues ultimately within the context of American democracy; his analysis was suffused with normative hues. However, as I will show, these three major facets (or issues) of public opinion became increasingly separated from one another over time in public opinion studies; that is, the study of public opinion became quite specialized and abstracted from a larger, comprehensive context. The "competence of the public" issue (and attendant concerns) gradually assumed hegemony to the neglect of the other issues. The leader/public nexus would receive minimal attention whereas the "constitution of public opinion" issue would receive uneven attention. Furthermore, the underlying focus of democratic governance was often absent in later writers. Scores of later writers, for example, spent considerable effort studying the thought-processes and rationality of citizens. While concerns with democratic governance were undoubtedly implicit in these discussions, they were often not broached very explicitly or were glossed over, the studies being generally more interesting from a psychological vantage point than from a political one.

Works on public opinion that appeared in the early part of the twentieth century were very similar in focus to Bryce's work. An important early work is Arthur Bentley's 1908 work *The Process of Government*.¹⁵ Although not specifically a book on public opinion, it nevertheless bears mentioning in this context, for public opinion was crucial to the analysis. As he put it, "What can there possibly be to a political science with the very breath of its life left out? He who writes of the law, or of politics, without first coming to close quarters with public opinion is simply evading the very central structure of his study."¹⁶ Bentley's study was concerned with the influence of groups on the processes of government and was a major precursor to studies of interest groups that would proliferate fifty years later.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, for

13. Bryce, *American Commonwealth*, 220-21.

14. Again, let me stress that Bryce was by no means the only person to deal with these issues nor the only influence on subsequent students of public opinion. However, he did articulate the dilemmas of public opinion in a comprehensive and judicious fashion; and, indeed, he was, if not the only influence, a big influence on key early writers such as A. L. Lowell and Walter Lippmann.

15. Arthur F. Bentley, *The Process of Government: A Study of Social Pressures* (Bloomington, IN: The Principia Press, 1935).

16. Bentley, *Process of Government*, 163.

17. See David B. Truman, *The Governmental Process: Political Interests and Public Opinion* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1951).

Bentley public opinion was group-based through and through: "There is no use attempting to handle public opinion except in terms of the groups that hold it and that it represents."¹⁸ Notable are Bentley's sociological perspective on public opinion (its relationship to groups), his connection of public opinion with the political process and his emphasis on democratic theory.

The first major book on public opinion by an American in the twentieth century is *Public Opinion and Popular Government* by A. Lawrence Lowell.¹⁹ The work, originally published in 1913, was an attempt at a systematic study of public opinion and its relationship to government. Lowell addressed most of Bryce's concerns (and paid his respects through citations), such as the relationship between experts and officials and the masses, the problem of majority opinion, and most importantly for him, the competence of the public. Moreover, he considered the problematic effects that party affiliations could have on opinion (which was ideally, for Lowell as for Bryce, an individual phenomenon). Lowell was essentially trying to divine the proper range of influence for the public on government; to establish what were legitimate topics for the public to voice opinions on; to decide which were "true" public opinions and which were "false."²⁰ His evaluation of the situation did not differ from Bryce's in any dramatic matter. He had faith in the mettle of the common people, yet he believed that their role must be carefully considered and delimited when necessary; that they must, at times, defer to elites and experts.

Another important early work on public opinion is Walter Lippmann's classic, *Public Opinion*, originally published in 1922.²¹ Lippmann was primarily concerned with debunking the "omniscient" notion of the citizen, which he saw as undergirding most normative theories of democracy. He argued that the citizen in modern society was at the center of a welter of stimuli that he could not manage well enough to judge competently most issues of governance. In this battle against the omniscient citizen, Lippmann brandished his famous concept of the "stereotype." The way that the normal citizen dealt with the myriad information that confronted him was by employing stereotypes and gross generalizations. While this was helpful for the individual in gaining some sort of comprehension of the world, it was detrimental to government. Because these citizens were distorting reality they were necessarily prone to making uninformed and poor decisions and, consequently, Lippmann believed that their role in politics should be severely constrained.

The public, then, for Lippmann was only qualified to register its opinions on a few items and even then only in Yes/No fashion. He pinned his hopes for efficient, democratic government on a class of social scientists who would, by virtue of their

18. Bentley, *Process of Government*, 236.

19. A. Lawrence Lowell, *Public Opinion and Popular Government* (New York: Johnson Reprints Corp., 1969).

20. Harwood L. Childs, Introduction to *Public Opinion*, by Lowell, xiv.

21. Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

social scientific training, be capable of adequately apprehending reality and would lead the public on the right track. Lippmann's analysis may at first glance (with its rather sophisticated psychological profile of common citizens) appear different from that of Lowell and Bryce; indeed, his work anticipated much of what was to come. However, he was still largely animated by similar concerns. Most notably, he was concerned with the role of the public in governance and what this meant for democracy and democratic theory. What most distinguishes Lippmann from Lowell and Bryce are his psychological sophistication (which would soon be far surpassed) and the marked pessimism with which he approached his subject.

Following closely on the heels of Lippmann's *Public Opinion*, and his quite similar but more cynical *The Phantom Public*,²² was John Dewey with his *The Public and Its Problems*, originally published in 1927.²³ Dewey basically accepted the terms of the debate as laid out by Lippmann. However, he expressed a faith in the common man that was largely absent in Lippmann's analysis. Dewey saw the problem of the public as a primarily "intellectual" problem; as a matter of devising the "means by which a scattered, mobile and manifold public may so recognize itself as to define and express its interests."²⁴ The people were capable of judgment and involvement in political matters; they simply were deprived of the resources necessary for them to be competent, active, and articulate.²⁵

Dewey criticized Lippmann's notion of a cadre of social scientists holding the reins of government, but his own ideas of reform also were premised on the development of the social sciences. He saw social science as eventually developing the art of communication in such manner that it could be used to rouse the public out of its slumber. Dewey illustrated his hopes through his discussion of news organs that were to be colonized by social science and art and would thereby help to "break the crust of conventionalized consciousness."²⁶

Whereas Dewey differed significantly in his hopes for the public, he trafficked in much the same conceptual terminology as Lippmann and exhibited a similar concern with the role of public opinion in the political process and in a democracy. An important difference, however, was that Dewey gave a much more complex interpretation of "the public." While Bryce, Lowell, and Lippmann, for differing (usually normative) reasons, saw the public as a collection of individual opinions aggregated, Dewey emphasized the group-oriented and interactive aspects of public opinion. He saw individuals as constituted by their social relations and saw public opinion to be ideally the result of the interactive behavior of individuals and groups who were rooted in traditions, cultures, and institutions; Dewey realized that "the

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

23. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Athens, OH: Swallow Press, 1954).

24. Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 147, 146.

25. Price, *Public Opinion*, 18.

26. Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 183.

public" was a composite of smaller and diverse publics and that it was misleading to speak of the public as a mere aggregation of individual opinions. In an important sense, he borrowed from the sociological approach of A. F. Bentley. Further, for Dewey democracy required the interaction, not merely the aggregation, of individual opinions.

II. The Critical Turning Point

At the same time that Dewey and Lippmann were having their debate about public opinion and democracy, psychologists were developing important concepts and tools that would eventually contribute to the revolutionizing of the study of public opinion. Just as Dewey was in some ways trying to resurrect a more organic and holistic notion of public opinion, developments were being made by Thurstone and Likert in psychological scaling measurement that would help to entrench firmly the individualist perspective in public opinion research. These innovations, coupled with developments in scientific sampling theory, led to the modern, scientific public opinion poll and its variations.²⁷ After the 1936 election and the accuracy of Gallup and others there was no turning back. Increasingly, researchers and leaders came to see opinion polls as the *sine qua non* of opinion research. Indeed, Franklin Roosevelt wasted little time before he utilized public opinion polls, going as far as having a personal pollster, Hadley Cantril.²⁸

The predominance of the poll as research tool would fundamentally change *how* and *what* researchers studied. Although initially, as we will see with Gallup and Rae, the poll was seen as a tool to give the common people a voice in government, later the poll became the sole measure of public opinion. After a period of time, public opinion came to be "what opinion polls poll"; the poll was normative no more, it was descriptive. Moreover, polling research gradually came to be used in large part to study the thought-processes and psychological dimensions of citizens *sans* any direct connection with governmental processes.

George Gallup and Saul Rae made the normative argument for polls in *The Pulse of Democracy*.²⁹ Gallup and Rae acknowledged their debt to Bryce and his pregnant ideas about a "fourth stage" of democracy and an adequate measure of public opinion. Indeed, following Bryce, Gallup and Rae argued that there was a need to discover the opinions of the people aside from merely at election-time: "elections can never be the sole channel for the expression of public opinion."³⁰ They went on to

27. Price, *Public Opinion*, 45.

28. See Hadley Cantril, *The Human Dimension: Experience in Policy Research* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1967).

29. George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae, *The Pulse of Democracy; The Public-Opinion Poll and How It Works* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1940).

30. Gallup and Rae, *Pulse of Democracy*, 21.

say that the more conventional forms of gauging public opinion, drawing on letters or newspaper stories, were insufficient because they might misrepresent the public. Only people who were intensely interested in an issue will conduct a letter-writing campaign, for example.

Gallup and Rae saw the poll as an important device by which to retain the features of majority rule, which they believed was the bulwark of U.S. democracy. If anything, tyranny of the *minority* had been America's problem.³¹ Interest groups with narrow concerns and goals (but often more than a narrow reserve of cash) were able to gain the ears of lawmakers and officials and thereby subvert the democratic (i.e., majority-rule) process. Gallup and Rae's faith in the people was even more unwavering than Bryce's:

The serious observer of public opinion on scores of issues cannot fail to come away with a feeling of intense admiration for the honesty and common sense with which an enormous number of ordinary people in all walks of life and at all levels of the economic scale have continued to meet their responsibilities as citizens.³²

The public opinion poll, then, was a way by which this responsible public could voice its claims on certain issues. But polls would not be definitive determinants of policy, they cautioned. Leaders would only use polls to help them do their jobs as representatives; they would not slavishly obey them. In fact, polls would sometimes alert leaders to problematic distributions of opinion in society and allow the leaders to guide the public to a more acceptable opinion.³³

While all of this may sound Panglossian and simplistic to us now, it is nonetheless true that Gallup and Rae had a normative theoretical context for their discussion of polling. They saw the function of the poll within the context of American democracy and in relation to questions of democratic rule, representation, the quality of citizenship, leadership and the like. In some ways, their arguments represent the culmination of the ideas laid out by Bryce some forty years before. Consequently, they were still concerned with most of the same normative, theoretical questions and they approached public opinion as part of a larger process of democratic government. Gallup and Rae, though, stand at a critical turning point in the study of public opinion. They represent both the earlier and later periods of public opinion research. They obviously represent a new era of study, which is defined by a more scientific, quantitative notion of public opinion; yet, they also painted broad normative and theoretical strokes in a way that harked back to the earlier students of opinion such as Lippmann or Lowell. The opinion poll was an aid in a less than perfect democracy; it was not a substitute for the citizenry.

31. Gallup and Rae, *Pulse of Democracy*, 271-72.

32. Gallup and Rae, *Pulse of Democracy*, 287.

33. Gallup and Rae, *Pulse of Democracy*, 270.

Gallup and Rae occupied a time when methodological and systemic, theoretical concerns were still on relatively the same footing in regard to the study of public opinion. However, this was a short-lived parity. Gradually, methodology began to lead the study of public opinion, with normative theoretical concerns fading and public opinion research generally becoming less systematic. The reasons for this are manifold. Certainly, there was a seductiveness in the ostensibly "hard science" nature of polls. Political science, sociology, and psychology, newly emerging disciplines, now had a tool to illustrate their similarity to the more "advanced," natural sciences. This drive for scientific respectability would certainly explain, in part, the excessive preoccupation with polls and the transformation of public opinion into "what opinion polls poll." As Margolis has put it, judging from current work on public opinion "it is as though no important work on public opinion was done before the advent of scientific polling."³⁴

Additionally, there is the pretense to "objective" study that accompanies the scientization of disciplines. This scientific ideology, residue of which is extant yet today, certainly conspired to place the larger theoretical concerns of the early public opinion writers on the back-burner. After the scientization of public opinion studies, as Albig has said, "broad theory or generalization thus appeared as intrusive noise, a process of diverting entropy."³⁵ Furthermore, "public opinion" became the sole property of no one discipline; rather, it was claimed by several. This aided the movement away from the decidedly "political" and "democratic" emphasis of the early writers. Whatever the causal mechanisms at work, by the 1950s the study of public opinion was on its way to being methodologically driven and theoretically somewhat barren.

III. The Modern Study of Public Opinion

To do a very thorough review of the proliferating literature on public opinion in the 1940s and beyond would require a yeoman effort far beyond the scope of this paper. However, to suggest the flavor of this literature, I will provide a sample of some of the representative and important works, works that have set the terms for subsequent debates. These representative works can be roughly identified from a sampling of published work in the major journals and from various "survey" articles and readers. Moreover, I will place some emphasis on more marginal arguments that surface to counter the dominant tendencies in the field.

As I mentioned, the marked success of polls in predicting elections made their stock soar with practitioners, academics, and even politicians (e.g., FDR). Survey research became, henceforth, the central tool in the study of public opinion and

34. Margolis, "Public Opinion," 66.

35. William Albig, "Two Decades of Public Opinion Study: 1936-1956," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 18.

individual behavior became the central unit of analysis. A helpful, yet impressionistic, way to make this point is to look at the lead article in the very first volume of *Public Opinion Quarterly*. The title of the article itself speaks volumes, "Toward a Science of Public Opinion." The author is Floyd Allport, a noted psychologist. Allport suggested that his article would be a "first step in formulating a workable scientific approach" to the study of public opinion. He identified a number of "fictions and blind alleys" that had led students of public opinion astray, among them the tendency to conceive of public opinion as some kind of mystical entity, a "daemon." Moreover, he stated quite emphatically that opinions "are reactions of individuals; they cannot be allocated to publics without becoming ambiguous and unintelligible for research."³⁶

With this trailblazing article we can see that the trend in public opinion research was clearly toward scientific research with the individual as the prime unit of analysis. What is almost even more interesting than the substance of Allport's essay is the authors whom he cited. Allport made only one reference to the earlier theorists of public opinion we have mentioned (Dewey); the rest of the citations were works within psychology or social psychology. This is suggestive, albeit anecdotal, evidence of the aforementioned claim that with the development of psychological scaling measurements, psychologists began more and more to dominate the field of public opinion.

Other early articles, written by established students of public opinion, can further imply trends in public opinion research. Paul Lazarsfeld's "The Controversy Over Detailed Interviews—An Offer for Negotiation," a well-known 1944 article, evinces the importance that academics and practitioners were placing on the minutiae of the survey research techniques. Continuing with these types of questions were Riesman and Glazer in their 1948 article, tellingly titled "The Meaning of Opinion." The authors were concerned with interviewer "rapport" with interviewees and with the possible class- or group-biases that interviewers and researchers allowed to intrude into their survey projects. Again, while this is only a small slice of the large amount of work that was done in the 1940s on public opinion, it does not appear to be atypical.³⁷

A 1947 sociological conference panel devoted to the study of public opinion further reinforces this argument about survey research (and attendant methodological quibbles concerning survey techniques) coming to dominate research on public opinion. Herbert Blumer, the symbolic interactionist, was asked to critically assess

36. Floyd H. Allport, "Toward a Science of Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1 (1937), 7, 9.

37. Paul F. Lazarsfeld, "The Controversy Over Detailed Interviews—An Offer for Negotiation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 8 (1944): 38-60 and David Riesman and Nathan Glazer, "The Meaning of Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 12 (1948): 633-648. Other typical articles include H. M. Spitzer, "Presenting America in American Propaganda," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11 (1947): 213-221; M. Brewster Smith, "The Personal Setting of Public Opinions: A Study of Attitudes Toward Russia," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11 (1947): 507-523; and Frederick W. Williams, "Regional Attitudes on International Cooperation," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9 (1945): 38-50.

the state of research on public opinion. He presented his analysis and received feedback from Theodore M. Newcomb and Julian Woodward.³⁸

Blumer was not one for euphemism: "their work [public opinion researchers] is largely merely making application of their technique."³⁹ He was speaking here, of course, of those researchers (a majority) who used polls to study public opinion. Blumer found the operational definition of public opinion, "public opinion consists of what public opinion polls poll,"⁴⁰ quite problematic. This approach did not get at the phenomenon of public opinion because public opinion was much more than the aggregated opinions of individuals.

Blumer outlined six points about public opinion which were "obvious and commonplace," but often unacknowledged, to illumine the deficiencies of standard public opinion research. Briefly, these six points are as follow: 1) public opinion is grounded within a context of "social processes" and the framework of our society; 2) society is comprised of groups and opinions are mostly group-oriented; 3) public opinion is made manifest through pressure of groups (and individuals) on leaders; 4) opinions of certain groups hold different weight with leaders who make decisions; 5) the formation and expression of public opinion follow the "important ways in which our society operates"; and 6) public opinion consists of the "pattern of the diverse views and positions on the issues *that come to the individuals who have to act in response to the public opinion*."⁴¹ The overall point is obviously that "public opinion" is an entity which is not adequately gauged by polling techniques.⁴²

Public opinion, for Blumer, could only be understood within a network of social (importantly, group) relations and institutional processes. Thus, the sampling methods used by pollsters, since they did not generally differentiate along group lines, were not up to the task of observing public opinion. The aggregation of individual opinions was totally neglectful of the functional distribution of opinion in society. What pollsters discovered might be a distribution that they would like to influence government; but the simple fact was, according to Blumer, that leaders paid attention primarily to *group* opinions (and powerful ones at that). Moreover, public opinion analysts generally did not study the behavior of government officials, viz., how

38. The presentations were reproduced in the *American Sociological Review* in 1948.

39. Herbert Blumer, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling," *American Sociological Review* 13 (1948): 542.

40. Blumer, "Public Opinion," 543.

41. Blumer, "Public Opinion," 543-45, emphasis in the original.

42. Lindsay Rogers expressed a similar criticism a few years later: "It is a curious fact that, although the pollsters have paid a great deal of attention to the problem of securing interviewers who are unbiased and do not cheat, they do not seem to have been greatly interested in the question of whether it is legitimate to add up the kind of opinion that is disclosed in interviews with strangers and call it 'public opinion.'" Lindsay Rogers, *The Pollsters: Public Opinion, Politics, and Democratic Leadership* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1949), 37.

they gauge public opinion and how they decide which opinions are important when making decisions.⁴³

Blumer, then, considered public opinion in broadly sociological and political terms, not unlike the earlier writers. The responses to Blumer's criticisms are quite interesting if not entirely persuasive. Newcomb, a noted social psychologist, made the condign criticism that Blumer over-generalized these tendencies of public opinion researchers. There were, Newcomb suggested, quite a number of practitioners and academics who were aware of the problems outlined by Blumer and who took steps in their research to address them.⁴⁴ But this is for the most part a facile point. Newcomb then moved on to level his most substantive critique, viz., that Blumer was just offering one definition of public opinion and opinion researchers another. As he said, Blumer "prefers his own formulation of the concept to that of others."⁴⁵ This criticism, however, merely evaded the issue with a pat relativistic argument. At issue was whether one of the concepts allowed researchers to more adequately understand how public opinion functions in a society. To say that Blumer had a different formulation of the problem was not to answer the question of whether his formulation was more adequate or heuristic.

Sociologist-cum-public opinion researcher Julian Woodward, on the other hand, did not evade this issue; to be sure, he went right to the crux of the matter when he argued that polls have a normative utility. He said that Blumer's concern with the empirical accuracy of polls missed the normative value of polls as a "means of holding pressure groups in check and forcing them to put their alleged popular support in evidence."⁴⁶ What polls purported to present was not the actual functional and institutional manifestations of opinion that normally influenced decision makers, but an ideal situation (Bryce's fourth stage of democracy) wherein each individual's opinion counted equally toward government policies. It was, as Woodward put it, an "auxiliary ballot box."⁴⁷ This was undoubtedly reminiscent of Gallup and Rae's arguments in *The Pulse of Democracy*.

However, this claim of Woodward's did not sufficiently defend the use of the poll as the *prime* tool in opinion research. For even if the poll helps leaders understand the mass's opinions, this does not mean that researchers should not still study the group-nature of opinions that actually influence government leaders, that researchers should use polls exclusively. Moreover, as Blumer himself argued, normatively, opinion polls are poor substitutes for organic and active groups which

43. Blumer, "Public Opinion," 545.

44. Theodore M. Newcomb, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling: Discussion," *American Sociological Review* 13 (1948): 550.

45. Newcomb, "Public Opinion Discussion," 550.

46. Julian Woodward, "Public Opinion and Public Opinion Polling: Discussion," *American Sociological Review* 13 (1948): 553.

47. Woodward, "Public Opinion Discussion," 553.

lobby the government for democratic reform. As he said, a reliance on a "mere 'referendum' by an undifferentiated mass, having great segments of indifference and non-participation, is unlikely to offer a desirable public opinion."⁴⁸ With the opinion poll to think and act for them, citizens would have no more tasks as democratic citizens than to go to the polls every two years and, on the slim chance that they were part of a poll sample, to diligently answer the interviewers' questions. For Blumer, this was a "dubious proposal for social reform."⁴⁹

As the criticisms of Newcomb and Woodward show, public opinion researchers certainly had disagreements with Blumer's arguments. Blumer made a valiant effort to object to what he thought was an unrealistic and superficial understanding of public opinion, but increasingly public opinion research would focus on psychological and social-psychological processes to the neglect of the political and sociological concerns that informed the "early modern" works on public opinion.⁵⁰ Many later writers would abstract public opinion even further from the political process. As Bogart said in 1967, "the world of public opinion in today's sense really began with the Gallup Polls of the mid-1930s, and it is impossible for us to retreat to the meaning of public opinion as it was understood by Thomas Jefferson in the eighteenth century, by Alexis de Tocqueville and Lord Bryce in the nineteenth,—or even Walter Lippmann in 1922."⁵¹

The field continued to evolve through the 1950s along psychological lines, and the survey would remain the integral tool.⁵² An important focus of research in the 1950s, for example, was the discovering of distinctions between "attitudes" and "opinions." While the terms had often been used interchangeably, scholars began to tackle this problem head-on in the 1950s and thereafter. G. D. Wiebe's 1953 article "Some Implications of Separating Opinions from Attitudes" discussed the ways in which researchers had traditionally discussed opinions and attitudes and sug-

48. Blumer, "Public Opinion," fn., 548.

49. Blumer, "Public Opinion," 548. Blumer here touches on another issue that is still neglected in public opinion circles. Few public opinion scholars problematize political participation and most are content to see political involvement as characterized by the expression of an opinion or by the casting of a ballot. Notions of public participation as discursive interaction à la Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, or Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989), are conspicuously rare.

50. Interestingly, public opinion researchers even today are still aware of Blumer's critique, if largely to dismiss it. See, for instance, Philip E. Converse, "Changing Conceptions of Public Opinion in the Political Process," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 51 (1987): S12-S24.

51. Leo Bogart, "No Opinion, Don't Know, and Maybe No Answer," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 31 (1967): 334.

52. To be sure, there were skeptical voices and nonsurvey-based and "political" studies being done during this time, although they were a minority. See, for instance, Martin Kriesberg, "What Congressmen and Administrators Think of the Polls," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 9 (1945): 333-337; John C. Ranney, "Do The Polls Serve Democracy?" *Public Opinion Quarterly* 10 (1946): 349-360; Rogers, *The Pollsters*; and the *Public Opinion Quarterly* symposium, "Communication to the Policy-Maker: Petition and Pressure," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 20 (1956): 5-48.

gested the utility of making clear distinctions between opinions and attitudes.⁵³ This distinction between attitudes and opinions launched myriad analyses and studies. Researchers have probed whether opinions are merely adaptations of underlying attitudes, whether there is no direct relationship, and so forth. Moreover, they have also attempted to discover the psychological bases of opinion: values, schemata, and group-identification, for example.⁵⁴ Probably the dominant question that informed much of this psychological research was the one that most preoccupied Lippmann: is the public competent?

Important among early studies of citizen competence were the seminal *The American Voter* and Philip E. Converse's "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics."⁵⁵ *The American Voter* took "the individual's voting act as a starting point . . . [and] moved backward in time and outward from political influences to trace the intricate pattern of causality leading to behavior at the polls."⁵⁶ While the "innocent of ideology" argument⁵⁷ would get its start with *The American Voter*, it really blossomed with Philip Converse's 1964 article. In this essay, Converse ostensibly proved rather convincingly that the public was "innocent of ideology." He found that Americans did not generally think ideologically, or in terms of "what is loosely called 'the history of ideas.'"⁵⁸ What is more, when they did, their opinions were unstable or inconsistent.⁵⁹ Converse did not argue that all Americans were of this type, but he did suggest that "of any direct participation in this history of ideas and the behavior that it shapes, the mass is remarkably innocent."⁶⁰

An important challenge to these studies was the work of Robert Lane. In *Political Ideology* and other works he took issue with the typical survey format used in most of these studies.⁶¹ Lane suggested that the normal survey format was too cursory to properly gauge citizen's opinions. He used extensive interviewing in his attempt to

53. G. D. Wiebe, "Some Implications of Separating Opinions from Attitudes," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 17 (1953): 328-52.

54. Price, *Public Opinion*, 52.

55. Angus Campbell, Philip E. Converse, Warren E. Miller, and Donald E. Stokes, *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley, 1960) and Philip E. Converse, "The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics," in *Ideology and Discontent*, ed. David E. Apter (New York: Free Press, 1964).

56. Campbell et al., *American Voter*, 521. It should be noted that Campbell and his colleagues were quite aware that their analysis only constituted a piece of the public opinion picture: "Our quest of understanding should not end with the discovery of the causes of electoral decisions; it should extend to their consequences as well." Yet, "almost no research has had as its primary objective the description of influence relations connecting the electoral process with other decision processes of the American government" (*American Voter*, 539-40). Notwithstanding this acknowledgment and lament, most analysts would continue to neglect these other connections and issues.

57. Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity."

58. Converse, "Nature of Belief Systems," 255.

59. Converse, "Nature of Belief Systems," 238-41.

60. Converse, "Nature of Belief Systems," 255.

61. Robert E. Lane, *Political Ideology: Why the American Common Man Believes What He Does* (New York: Free Press, 1962).

understand the thinking of the common man. With this format, "there was opportunity for extended probing, for pushing further into the personal meaning of clichés and conventional phrases, for testing whether or not the first impression gained was the correct one, for reflecting back the sense of what was said to clarify the men's own thinking."⁶² Employing this method, Lane was putatively able to discover "latent" ideological themes in the men's thinking, and therefore, the "innocent of ideology" thesis had to be modified if not abandoned.

While Lane offered an important critique of the dominant outlook in opinion research, he was still largely focusing on the psychological side of public opinion. An interesting (and atypical) work of the early 1960s which does not fall into the psychological mode of opinion study is *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, by the eminent political scientist, V. O. Key.⁶³ Key's preface to the work deserves to be quoted at length:

During the past two decades the study of public opinion, once a major concern of political scientists, has become a preoccupation of sociologists and social psychologists. By the application of the techniques of their trade these specialists have made substantial contributions to the understanding of public opinion. Yet as they have done so, they have also in large measure abstracted public opinion from its governmental setting. We have, consequently, a large body of research findings characterized often by methodological virtuosity and on occasion even by theoretical felicity, whose relevance for the workings of the governmental system is not always apparent.⁶⁴

For Key, the problem with the psychological or social-psychological focus in public opinion research was that it tended to prejudice researchers in their studies; that is, they looked at things like opinion trends, opinion formation, ideological thinking, and the like, without asking how the opinions actually influenced and impacted governmental decision making. The "missing element" of the opinion system, for Key, was the "elite element," namely, the dynamic relationship between mass opinion, activist opinion groups and leaders, and government officials.⁶⁵ Notably, Key drew upon a more group-based notion of opinion in his formulation: the public being composed of different groups with varying degrees of interest in certain policies.⁶⁶

62. Lane, *Political Ideology*, 9.

63. V. O. Key, *Public Opinion and American Democracy* (New York: Knopf, 1961).

64. Key, *Public Opinion*, vii.

65. Key, *Public Opinion*, 536-37.

66. I am not, by making this statement, arguing that "groups" have not been an important aspect of public opinion research. I do want to argue, though, that public opinion scholars have generally looked at groups to determine how they affect the opinions of individuals, not how they *qua* groups influence politics. Key, in discussing "attentive publics" was harking back to a Blumerian or even Bentley-like understanding of the public and the political process. Not surprisingly, this type of understanding of public opinion was less amenable to analysis through public opinion polls.

Key was certainly not off-the-mark in his assessment of the state of opinion research. Public opinion research had indeed, as we have suggested, taken a psychological direction through the 1940s and 1950s, losing sight of its theoretical and systematic political origins; and research would continue on this path through the sixties and beyond. Several scholars, surveying the public opinion research of this period, made points strikingly similar to Key's. Hyman posited on the twentieth anniversary of *Public Opinion Quarterly*: "The state of our psychological theory about opinion formation is healthy; the missing social psychological and sociological elements of a theory can be remedied with some changes in emphasis in our empirical work. But what of the other fundamental aspect of a theory of public opinion; the aspect that relates public opinion to the political process, to political forms of society?"⁶⁷ This aspect Hyman saw as much neglected in public opinion research. William Albig, also marking *Public Opinion Quarterly's* twentieth anniversary, chided "though Walter Lippmann once more, in *The Public Philosophy* (1955), states ethical and philosophical issues, his book is a Sargasso iceberg amidst a flood of contributions which are atheoretical, non-ethical, largely quantitative descriptions of some particular segment of the opinion process."⁶⁸

"If the tendency of the studies of public opinion to drift away from the major problems of political science continues . . . work in public opinion [will] tend to lose sight of the political framework that can make it broadly meaningful," Minar tentatively concluded at the dawn of the 1960s.⁶⁹ Several years later, Harwood Childs similarly offered that "all in all it would appear that public opinion research is overwhelmingly preoccupied with finding out what public opinion is, and with the role of communication agencies in the opinion-forming process."⁷⁰ Capping off the decade, Sidney Verba, noting the irrelevancy of public opinion research to macro-theory, argued that the "main reason for this irrelevancy is the focus in most public opinion research on the individual citizen as a unit of analysis and on the explanations for his political attitudes or behavior."⁷¹

To be sure, I have not presented a complete picture (although it is a fairly generalizable picture) of the work that was produced in this period. I have stressed the individualized notion of public opinion research and the tendency to make public opinion a psychological rather than a political study. However, notable "psychological" studies did sometimes broach political questions, as when Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee asked in concluding their study *Voting*: "What does all this mean for the political theory of democracy?"⁷²

67. Herbert H. Hyman, "Toward a Theory of Public Opinion," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 21 (1957): 59.

68. Albig, "Two Decades," 21.

69. Minar, "Public Opinion," 32.

70. Childs, *Public Opinion*, 62.

71. Sidney Verba, "The Impact of the Public on Policy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 34 (1970): 455.

72. Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee, *Voting: A Study of Opinion Formation in a Presidential Campaign* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954), 305.

Moreover, some writers did focus on more sociological, group-oriented conceptions of public opinion like Blumer had advised, although Noelle-Neumann has recently suggested that research of this ilk is still lacking.⁷³ Truman and Davison, among others, concerned themselves with the relationship between groups and opinion.⁷⁴ Of course, Truman's pioneering work on pressure groups, wherein he clearly linked group pressure, public opinion, and governance, was much indebted to A. F. Bentley. Yet, regrettably, the relationship between Truman's analysis and the field of public opinion research has not always been particularly strong. Davison also discussed, *inter alia*, the importance of groups in the "public opinion process." But, he was nevertheless mostly concerned with the psychological dynamics at work in the opinion process, such as the effect of group behavior on the thoughts and actions of individuals; he was not very concerned with the influence of groups on leaders or decision makers (as was Blumer).

Further, other authors did try to understand the linkages of public opinion to leaders and government. For instance, a very influential article appeared in the 1963 *American Political Science Review* called "Constituency Influence in Congress," by Warren Miller and Donald Stokes.⁷⁵ This article would lay the groundwork for a number of studies that would attempt to explain the linkages between government leaders (usually members of Congress) and constituents or public opinion. This work indeed focused on the political aspects of public opinion; yet, what is interesting about these types of studies is that they are not seen by many as being part of the study of public opinion *proper*.⁷⁶ They are more likely to be seen as mainly congressional or institutional studies. Additionally, these studies are not without their problems, one being that they often use statistical *correlation* to explain *causation*. Public opinion is said to have influenced political leaders if their decisions correlate with public opinion; yet, we do not really know whether the leaders are, in fact, acting because of public opinion or some other, similarly correlated variable.⁷⁷ But the more important drawback is that public opinion is often not problematized in these studies; that is, it is often gauged merely as reflected by poll results. Many of these studies, contrary to the advice of Blumer, simply take public opinion to be "what public opinion polls poll" without considering the complexity of the public opinion process.

73. Noelle-Neumann, *Spiral of Silence*, 219.

74. Truman, *Governmental Process* and W. Phillips Davison, "The Third-Person Effect in Communication," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 47 (1983): 1-15.

75. Warren E. Miller and Donald E. Stokes, "Constituency Influence in Congress," *American Political Science Review* 57 (1963): 45-56.

76. See, for example, Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity."

77. One of the few studies that did not fall into this predicament was John Kingdon's *Congressmen's Voting Decisions*, 3rd ed. (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1989). Kingdon did not correlate congressmen's decisions with public opinion surveys; rather, he asked congressmen, in interviews, what affected their decisions and how big a role public opinion played.

Key's plea notwithstanding, then, the study of public opinion continued in its psychological and survey-based direction, with sparing emphasis on the group dimensions of public opinion, the linkages between the public and elites, and democratic theory. In the 1970s, public opinion research was still addressing, among other things, the claims of Converse and the "innocent of ideology" thesis. For instance, Nie, Verba, and Petrocik's *The Changing American Voter* argued that although Converse's claims were apt for citizens of the 1950s, they were not an adequate reflection of citizens in the 1960s.⁷⁸ Events in the 1960s, according to Nie et al., such as the Johnson/Goldwater contest, served to attune Americans much more to ideological considerations; hence, they discovered that Americans were not so "innocent of ideology" in the 1960s. This study quickly became accepted by a number of scholars, yet it also received its fair share of criticism from partisans of the "innocent of ideology" argument. Many of the debates centered on ostensible methodological problems with Converse's studies and the Nie et al. study. A sort of consensus was finally reached in that most agree that "Americans are decisively more stable on some policy matters than others" and that the "nature of the times" does often times influence opinion coherence and stability.⁷⁹

Discordant voices could again be heard in the 1970s, of course. For example, Robert Weissberg's 1976 volume *Public Opinion and Popular Government* (which, interestingly, bears the same title as A. L. Lowell's 1913 work) was specifically aimed at providing a "political" alternative to the psychological and social-psychological emphases in opinion research.⁸⁰ However, the emphasis on the "political" and the political process in public opinion research did not command a large audience, at least throughout the 1970s and early 1980s. In fact, some scholars, Donald Kinder chief among them, directly challenged a return to the study of public opinion within the political process. Kinder was much less troubled than Key (and Weissberg and others) about the psychological emphasis in public opinion research. As he put, "unlike Key, I recommend a deeper penetration of public opinion research by psychological concepts."⁸¹ Kinder took a different tack than Key about the utility of abstracting public opinion from the workings of the political

78. Norman H. Nie, Sidney Verba, and John R. Petrocik, *The Changing American Voter* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976).

79. Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity," 397. The following are just a few of the numerous studies spawned by the "innocent of ideology" debate: James A. Stimson, "Belief Systems: Constraint, Complexity, and the 1972 Election," *American Journal of Political Science* 19 (1975): 393-418; Christopher H. Achen, "Mass Political Attitudes and the Survey Response," *American Political Science Review* 69 (1975): 1218-1231; Eric R. A. N. Smith, "The Levels of Conceptualization: False Measure of Ideological Sophistication," *American Political Science Review* 74 (1980): 685-96; and Pamela Johnston Conover and Stanley Feldman, "The Origins and Meaning of Liberal/Conservative Self-Identifications," *American Journal of Political Science* 25 (1981): 617-45.

80. Robert Weissberg, *Public Opinion and Popular Government* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976), 5.

81. Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity," 413.

system. Playing on Key's language in *Public Opinion and American Democracy*,⁸² Kinder concluded that "the study of public opinion will always be bootless if we cannot manage to get the basic findings straight."⁸³ Whereas Key was worried that all the research on the attitudes of the public would be meaningless if these attitudes could not be shown to impact government (hence, his emphasis on discovering this impact), Kinder was concerned that the public be adequately understood before these institutional, governmental connections were researched.

IV. Changing Trends

For much of the past half century, then, public opinion studies concerned themselves first and foremost with the psychological and social-psychological facets of public opinion. It was as if scholars surgically removed "public opinion" from the body politic and placed it on the examination table for a period of extensive study. It appears, however, that public opinion has been reinserted into the body politic by an increasing number of researchers in the past decade or so. As Paul Sniderman has put it, using a different metaphor, there has been a "movement of politics from the wings to center-stage."⁸⁴ A number of very important and major works have appeared, particularly in the 1990s, that are suggestive of this trend.

James Stimson has initiated a quite fascinating line of public opinion research that shows a strong concern for the importance of opinion within the process of governing with his *Public Opinion in America*. He expresses a distinct interest in what he calls "the public opinion that matters."⁸⁵ By this Stimson means "public" opinion as distinguished from "private" opinion, the latter being the major focus of study in public opinion research of the past several decades. Stimson takes a different tack from many of the analyses of public opinion we have discussed in this essay. By aggregating opinion polls "over people *and then* over issues to a single measure,"⁸⁶ Stimson seeks to move from a psychological study of "private" opinion to an understanding of the "public" opinion that does (and should) matter to governing.

While Stimson focuses mostly on the *nature* of public opinion, he does also attempt to understand how the opinions of the public are changed or affected over time; how they relate to elite decision making. What is more, Stimson calls his monograph an "unfinished essay" because he rightly understands that he has only

82. Key, *Public Opinion*, 535.

83. Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity," 416.

84. Sniderman, "New Look," 219. While I obviously think Sniderman is right about this movement in public opinion research, as will become clear in the following discussion, I do have a slightly different understanding of the works and studies which characterize and evidence this movement toward the "political."

85. James A. Stimson, *Public Opinion in America: Moods, Cycles, and Swings* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 14.

86. Stimson, *Public Opinion*, 3, emphasis in the original.

examined one side of the equation.⁸⁷ Consistent with the earlier writers on public opinion, Stimson looks to apprehend public opinion in a comprehensive manner; to wit, "the ultimate purpose of this research is the study of representation, specifically, longitudinal representation, or governments responding to shifting public mood. This essay is about public mood only; the representation study is under way as I write."⁸⁸

Similarly, Page and Shapiro in their monumental *The Rational Public* take issue with conventional public opinion research's penchant for focusing on individuals' opinions. Through aggregation of hundreds of opinion polls over time, the authors seek to ascertain "collective" public opinion rather than individual public opinion. This type of collective public opinion is "stable (though not immovable), meaningful, and indeed rational," the authors conclude much against the grain of the "innocent of ideology" analyses.⁸⁹ In addition to expanding upon the psychological conception of public opinion and engaging in a more systemic understanding of public opinion, Page and Shapiro's analysis is also remarkable for its head-on treatment of issues of democratic and normative political theory. While one often has to infer the implications for democratic theory in many public opinion studies, the implications of their work for democratic theory are distinctly spelled out.

Another recent work that is quite notable on this same front is John Zaller's *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Zaller's immediate aim is to analyze "how people form political preferences."⁹⁰ Yet his work can be distinguished in two important ways from the common ilk of psychological studies of public opinion. First, like Stimson and Page and Shapiro, Zaller problematizes public opinion polls and does not simply accept that they convey "public opinion." In fact, Zaller quite cleverly utilizes the very shortcomings and pitfalls of opinion polls to help spin out his theory of the nature and origins of public opinion. Second, and importantly, Zaller spends the concluding chapter of the volume addressing the possibilities of elite domination of public opinion with a clear eye toward issues of democratic governance.

With these three works we see major scholars growing impatient with the conventional emphasis on the psychological side of public opinion. They are seeking to ascertain, to use Stimson's phrase, "the public opinion that matters"; they are injecting politics back into the study of public opinion. They are still essentially concerned with the question of whether the public is competent or rational, but they are approaching the question in a much more broad-ranging and systematic manner, not unlike Bryce or Lippmann. Additionally, they are quite attuned to the problem-

87. Stimson, *Public Opinion*, xvii.

88. Stimson, *Public Opinion*, xxi.

89. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, *The Rational Public: Fifty Years of Trends in Americans' Policy Preferences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 15.

90. John Zaller, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1.

atic aspects of opinion polls and have moved beyond seeing public opinion as simply individual responses to public opinion polls. What is perhaps most notable is how these scholars, particularly Page and Shapiro, explicitly broach and address the issues of democratic theory that appertain to their findings. Although front-and-center in the traditional analysts of public opinion, these concerns, as we noted, have been muted or elided in much public opinion research of the past generation.⁹¹

Perhaps even more in line with the traditional approach to public opinion is a spate of new studies that seek to address the linkages between government and public opinion. As I have already mentioned, although there is an important academic tradition of linkage studies inaugurated by Miller and Stokes, these studies have often been neglected in public opinion circles and many have significant shortcomings as well. However, a number of encouraging works, which are remedying these drawbacks, have appeared by scholars of public opinion. For example, Carmines and Stimson show how changes at the elite level in the political system can have important effects on the thinking of the mass of citizens and Brody examines the influence that elite opinion has on the public support of presidents.⁹² These are almost surely the kind of studies Key had in mind when he made his incisive critique of opinion research and suggested that scholars attend to the "elite element" in the opinion process.⁹³ Further, Page and Shapiro and Erikson, McIver, and Wright have reprised, in improved fashion, the opinion-policy studies that flourished after Miller and Stokes.⁹⁴ What is more, these opinion-policy studies appear to have piqued more interest in public opinion circles the second time around.⁹⁵

Jacobs and Shapiro have pushed this type of "process" study into an even more interesting and original direction.⁹⁶ Drawing on public opinion polls but also archival and historical research they are able to get a good picture of how presidential candidates (in this case JFK) make decisions in light of public opinion. The authors

91. Another notable work which bears mentioning in this context is Paul M. Sniderman and Edward G. Carmines, *Reaching Beyond Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997). The authors, while concerning themselves largely with the beliefs of the public on issues of race, express a skepticism toward conventional survey analyses and also exhibit a decided concern with the political and normative implications of their research.

92. Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989) and Richard A. Brody, *Assessing the President: The Media, Elite Opinion, and Popular Support* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

93. Sidney Verba and Gary R. Orren, *Equality in America: The View from the Top* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), among others, have also made an important contribution to understanding the "elite element" in opinion by focusing on the opinions of elites and leaders regarding equality.

94. Benjamin I. Page and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Effects of Public Opinion on Policy," *American Political Science Review* 77 (1983): 175-90; Robert S. Erikson, John P. McIver, and Gerald C. Wright, Jr., "State Political Culture and Public Opinion," *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987): 797-813; and Robert S. Erikson, Gerald C. Wright, and John P. McIver, *Statehouse Democracy: Public Opinion and Democracy in the American States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

95. See Sniderman, "New Look," 239.

96. Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Issues, Candidate Image, and Priming: The Use of Polls in Kennedy's 1960 Presidential Campaign," *American Political Science Review* 88 (1994): 527-40.

notably employ archival and interpretive research methods in their analysis because "questions concerning how and why real politicians use and are influenced by polling results have been neglected."⁹⁷ Jacobs has done an innovative study as well, in which he analyzes the creation of a specific policy (health policy) and traces the influence of public opinion on the policy process, through institutional and organizational channels. He similarly challenges conventional survey-based research techniques and, moreover, he considers his findings within the context of liberal democracy and normative theory.⁹⁸

It should be stressed that what is perhaps most striking about this research in public opinion by Jacobs and Shapiro is its reluctance to understand public opinion and politics merely or primarily by survey methodology. There is a decided recognition of the drawbacks and limitations of survey techniques and quantitative methods and an understanding of the usefulness of what is often called, in methodological circles, "thick description." One can putatively better penetrate the "black box" of decision making or governmental process (and thereby understand the influence and role of public opinion) by delving into government documents, archival records, and other "qualitative" sources.⁹⁹ Today's scholars appear to be taking William Albright's 1957 assessment of quantitative public opinion researchers to heart: "Admirable though their commitment and devotion to empiricism often proved, and fruitful as it was in the accumulation of descriptive minutiae, there remained the nine-tenths and more of the opinion process as yet undescribed, or quantitatively undescribable."¹⁰⁰

Some scholars, further, more than simply casting aside conventional opinion polls as the primary methodological tool, have utilized them as independent variables in their research. For instance, Ginsberg has pointed out how opinion polls facilitate the "domestication of mass opinion" and Herbst likewise has illuminated the ill effects that opinion polls and the quantification of opinion can have on democratic politics.¹⁰¹ Jacobs and Shapiro have examined presidential use of opinion polls, in particular, the manner by which President Nixon utilized polls and pollsters to advance his political interests.¹⁰² Other writers, such as Fishkin and Yankelovich, have done important work

97. Jacobs and Shapiro, "Issues, Candidate Image, and Priming," 529.

98. Lawrence R. Jacobs, *The Health of Nations: Public Opinion and the Making of American and British Health Policy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

99. Benjamin I. Page, "Democratic Responsiveness? Untangling the Links Between Public Opinion and Policy," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 27 (1994): 28.

100. Albright, "Two Decades," 18.

101. Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Captive Public: How Mass Opinion Promotes State Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1986) and Susan Herbst, *Numbered Voices: How Opinion Polling Has Shaped American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

102. Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, "The Rise of Presidential Polling: The Nixon White House in Historical Perspective," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 59 (1995): 163-95 and Lawrence R. Jacobs and Robert Y. Shapiro, "Presidential Manipulation of Polls and Public Opinion: The Nixon Administration and the Pollsters," *Political Science Quarterly* 110 (1995): 519-38.

considering the uses to which opinion polls can be put so as to be bulwarks for our democratic political system.¹⁰³ It would seem here that the original impetus for polling, expressed by Gallup and Rae, is slowly being recovered.¹⁰⁴

These eclectic methodological stances, moreover, are not confined to the margins of public opinion research, as they previously had been. An editorial preceding the 1994 volume of *Public Opinion Quarterly* is indicative of the trend in methodological liberalism. Stanley Presser notes that survey research and methodological questions about survey research have dominated the journal for a number of years and that "the field of public opinion is enriched by nonsurvey approaches, including historical studies, laboratory experiments, and qualitative investigations."¹⁰⁵ Thus, he exhorts researchers engaging in more qualitative studies to submit their work to *Public Opinion Quarterly*.

That this methodological liberalism should be concomitant with a number of new studies in public opinion that are more systematic and political and less psychologically driven should come as no surprise. As mentioned earlier, the development of the public opinion poll fundamentally changed not only *how* researchers studied public opinion, but it also changed *what* they would study, what questions they would ask. With a healthy skepticism towards polls and quantitative methods and an acknowledgment of their limitations, a significant number of scholars are asking different questions about, and offering new perspectives on, public opinion. Interestingly, these new perspectives largely manifest a more comprehensive and political, process-oriented understanding of public opinion that we noted in the traditional writers on public opinion, all of whom wrote before the development of public opinion polls. We might thusly say that contemporary public opinion researchers are beginning to recover integral elements of traditional public opinion research, that child and parent are becoming reacquainted after a long estrangement. Yet, as I will address in the conclusion, the rapprochement has not been complete, particularly when it comes to recovering the normative emphases of the early writers.

V. Conclusion

These recent developments in public opinion research clearly should be applauded. While some have suggested the importance of a stronger intermingling

103. James S. Fishkin, *Democracy and Deliberation: New Directions for Democratic Reform* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991); James S. Fishkin, *Voice of the People: Public Opinion and Democracy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); and Daniel Yankelovich, *Coming to Public Judgment* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1991).

104. Fishkin, in particular, focuses on a conception of public opinion that has been jettisoned by many public opinion researchers, with the noted exceptions of Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, and Habermas, *Structural Transformation*. He conceives of democracy as "deliberation"; deliberation should be encouraged among citizens when forming opinions and making decisions. His "deliberative opinion poll" is a way to harness the power of polls to service the end of dialogic democracy.

105. Stanley Presser, "Editorial," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 58 (1994): 1.

of public opinion and psychological research,¹⁰⁶ I would argue that it is time to push the study of public opinion away from its psychological focus and its reliance on quantitative survey methodology, at least somewhat. Certainly, there is no doubting the important findings of a generation of methodologically sophisticated studies of individual thought processes and the formation of public opinion. Yet, there is still quite a bit of truth in E. E. Schattschneider's perspective on public opinion research in 1960. Schattschneider was vexed by the almost unconscious assumption of public opinion researchers "that public opinion plays a great role in a democracy."¹⁰⁷ But was public opinion, in fact, important in our political system, to our political leaders? he asked. He did not believe that this assumption had been sufficiently plumbed by researchers.

Schattschneider therefore suggested: "Before we invest the energies of a generation of political scientists in public opinion research, would it not be wise to make an attempt to *test* the validity of the underlying propositions about the relations of public opinion to what is happening in the world around us?"¹⁰⁸ Although a bit heavy-handed, Schattschneider's admonition should give us pause. Why should we spend, as Kinder has suggested, most of our time figuring out how and what the public thinks, when we know very little about whether and to what extent the public matters to the leaders of our political system? After all, as Schattschneider said, it may turn out that the mass public's opinions do not matter very much to political elites. Would not we have been wasting our time, then, studying mass opinion for so long?

Whereas Schattschneider likely would have answered a definitive "Yes" to this question, I would not. Psychological and social-psychological studies of public opinion have provided important insights into how individuals learn and comprehend information, how they develop their political opinions, and how social contexts affect opinions, among other things. Regardless of public opinion's influence on governance, these types of findings are important. For instance, they may speak directly to the methods we use to educate our children or our manner of presenting news and information to the public. A better educated population to whom is provided substantial, yet manageable information, is certainly nothing at which to scoff, even if this public is relatively uninvolved in governance. Furthermore, there are also strong normative democratic justifications for studying public opinion regardless of its actual role in our politics. Even if there is largely no strong connection between government and public opinion, study of public opinion *per se* still is eminently worthwhile. Finding that the public is indeed quite "rational" and competent would provide ammunition for criticizing a system that excludes the public and for thereby advocating an enlarged role for the public. Discovering that the public is largely

106. Kinder, "Diversity and Complexity," 413.

107. E. E. Schattschneider, *The Semisovereign People: A Realist's View of Democracy in America* (Hindale, IL: The Dryden Press, [1960] 1975), 128.

108. Schattschneider, *Semisovereign People*, 128.

uninformed and incompetent could help to spur increased political educational efforts in schools and communities, so that the case could ultimately be made for broad inclusion of citizens in decision making.

But to make this defense is not to entirely dismiss Schattschneider's argument (which, incidentally, bears a strong resemblance to Key's argument, which we outlined above). This defense, and others we might devise, seems hardly enough to justify expending most of the energy of a sub-discipline. And continuing this effort on the basis of an *assumption* that public opinion matters to governance seems rather dubious as well. Not only does the study of *public* opinion lose its meaning when we extricate it from the political process, but the progress of research arguably suffers as well. A more moderate and reasonable course would be to probe both public opinion in its individual and social-psychological dimensions *and* in its relationship with governing. In this way, the study of public opinion, a concept which is essentially connected to government and the process of governing, will gain renewed meaning, purpose, and direction. What is more, with a number of scholars working within this more systematic framework, it is quite plausible that significant strides in our understanding of public opinion, broadly construed, would be made.

Understanding how government thinks about and responds to public opinion, for example, may force researchers to conceptualize and analyze the public's opinions in different and novel ways. Alternatively, unmasking the thought processes of the public and the formation of public opinion may compel researchers to look at neglected possibilities of government influence or impact on public opinion and to foreclose other possibilities. It seems evident that public opinion research stands to profit from this cross-fertilization, this multiplicity of theoretical and methodological avenues being pursued, and that a stubborn adherence to one or another paradigm, whether it be psychological or political, would be stultifying.

The current course of public opinion research should be seen as a promising development, then. The "new look" in public opinion research, being very much like the "old look" in public opinion research, manifests a more systematic and wide-ranging understanding of public opinion. There is an effort to understand not just the "micro-politics" of public opinion, but also the "macro-politics." And, of course, it is when we focus on macro-political issues that we are most likely to broach normative issues. And much of the "new look" public opinion research is making strides toward injecting normative theory into their analyses of public opinion, with Page and Shapiro's *The Rational Public* a quite good example.

Yet, the record is still mixed when it comes to this normative dimension. Whether it be the result of residual positivism or other factors, many contemporary researchers "carefully avoid addressing the implications of their findings for democratic theory."¹⁰⁹ Perhaps the neglect of the traditional writers on public opinion (for

109. Jacobs and Shapiro, "Studying Substantive Democracy," 10.

instance, Margolis found that most of the leading textbooks in public opinion made no reference to early writers such as Bryce, Lippmann and Lowell¹¹⁰) has also had something to do with this avoidance of normative argument.¹¹¹ These early works are an excellent source for understanding the connections between public opinion and democratic politics. Although many of them would not measure up to the methodological standards that have evolved in the social sciences (quantitative and qualitative standards), they can offer a rich store of normative guidance.

When the early writers were discussing public opinion, they always explicitly linked it to questions of democracy. With the public being a "new force in the world" during Bryce's time and in the early twentieth century, these early writers might be expected to focus heavily on the connections of public opinion and democratic government. Nevertheless, just because we have lived with mass democracy for quite some time, this does not sanction the neglect of democratic considerations. In fact, we should probably be more attentive today to questions of democracy, lest we risk complacently saddling ourselves with a facile notion of democracy as "rule by public opinion polls."

This does not mean that every article or book on public opinion need begin or end with a long discussion of democratic theory and public opinion; rather, and more modestly, researchers should at least, even if briefly, posit the implications of their work for democratic politics and theory. Surely, this is not too much to expect in a post-behavioralist academic world. A re-acquaintance with the early works of public opinion may be quite useful in this regard: it may help foster, in current research, a readiness to point out the implications of one's findings for democratic governance and to probe the nature of democratic governance itself. Until this type of emphasis pervades more of our current research, the reunion of parent and child will remain incomplete.

110. Margolis, "Public Opinion," 66.

111. An excellent new textbook which comprehensively treats public opinion, and which will hopefully become a standard in public opinion courses, is Carroll J. Glynn, Susan Herbst, Garrett J. O'Keefe, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Public Opinion: Politics, Communication, and Social Process* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999).