

Public Opinion in America

MOODS, CYCLES, AND SWINGS

Second Edition

James A. Stimson

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



A Member of the Perseus Books Group

(1980)—show dramatic trending change. In the domain of public policy controversies—the “weather”—these critical social issues are but a very small part of the issue set and trend is the exception to the norm of cyclical fluctuation.

10. Whether it is few or many who desire the quickest exit from political life depends on what kind and level of politics we are considering. Barber’s old (1965) but still up-to-date study of state legislators is a useful view of the other side of political life, a side where “going home” may often be the central motivation.

11. Financial gain used to be on the laundry list of motivations to public life, if never very prominently. The evidence now seems overwhelming that financial loss, relative to what could be had elsewhere by people of comparable talent and industry, is the more likely outcome of a political career.

12. This is similar in concept to the Converse, Clausen, and Miller (1965) assertion about the mass electorate that the apparent Goldwater surge in numbers of conservative voters in 1964 came largely from a small group who were very vocal. Were there a rich enough time dimension, I think we would have seen relatively constant numbers of such conservatives and strong variation in their frequency of public expression. In the expression of the times, the conservatives were “coming out of the woodwork.”

13. See Beck (1986) and a response by Weisberg (1986) for intriguing analyses of the directions in which the study of voting might have developed but did not. Weisberg shows that a number of alternative issues in voting flowered before the advent of surveys of voting behavior, each more or less abandoned as the psychology of voter choice became the one ring of a one-ring circus.

2

The Concept of Policy Mood

Since out of drift and incoherence, settled aims do appear, there must be . . . a national mind, a spirit of the age which imposes order upon random opinion.

—Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*

General Social Survey (GSS) interviewers in the field might have noticed in February 1980 that, with few exceptions, on question after question—on whether we should take measures to equalize wealth between rich and poor; on whether we were spending enough for such problems as health, the environment, and big cities; on whether police permits should be required for gun purchases; on whether the federal income tax was too high; and so forth—there were fewer liberal responses and more conservative ones than there had been in the last survey. Sometimes a lot fewer and a lot more, but in the norm a percentage point or two or three. And the same had been true the previous February: more conservatives and fewer liberals than the year before. And before that, again the same. And interviewers for Trendex, Roper, Gallup, and the National Election Study (NES)—for all the organizations that sampled public opinion with some regularity—talking to different respondents at varying times might have noticed the same pattern. And all who continued to watch might have noticed a reversal of that pattern after 1980, when there began to be more liberals and fewer conservatives year by year.

Over the errors and fluctuations inherent in the survey enterprise, interviewers talking to real people about their views might have seen a pattern. Not merely a response to guns or taxes, to cities or health care, environment, or wealth, that pattern was more general, a changing mood in the electorate. Not merely “improving and protecting the natural environment” or taxes “too high, about right, or too low,” it was global, a different feeling about most of the things government did, a different

feeling about government itself. Perhaps it was the sum of many different people reacting separately to many different issues, each in its own terms. But it is unlikely that the terms of each issue should have moved independently in the same direction at the same time. Perhaps it was this "mood" itself, a single factor, that changed.

Mood is a familiar notion in other aspects of life. And it finds its way into politics in the musings of commentators. But mood is not a well-defined idea in scholarly treatments of public opinion. Making some sense of it in scientific terms is the principal function of this chapter. This word itself, *mood* (which I use as shorthand for policy mood or domestic policy mood), is intended to be a scientific alias for what Lippmann called, with some skepticism, the "spirit of the age." It connotes shared feelings that move over time and circumstance. Not "moody," meaning fickle, erratic, emotional, *mood* here captures the idea of changing *general* dispositions. In everyday usage, when we are angry, depressed, cheerful, optimistic—whatever—about everything, we call it a mood. Policy mood is the same idea applied to policies and publics; it implies that publics see every public issue through general dispositions. Tied to the language of psychology, its content is political. I conclude in the end that it looks also to be consistent with assumptions about rational behavior, that is to say, well out of the customary realm of psychology.

The Dynamics of Public Policy Preference: A Model of Public Opinion

Where one presumes that public opinion is no more than the answers to opinion, belief, and preference questions in surveys, which is pretty much the norm in this highly operationalist domain, then no further substantive model is required.¹ But that approach can't yield a set of rules for how we might measure a concept. It simply tells one that the measure *is* the measure.

The familiar lore of political eras—the liberal 1960s, the Reagan revolution of the 1980s, and so forth—carries no explicit model. It is what it is without much reflection. That is why it is political lore and nothing more. But a systematic view of policy mood, as it might drive representation, requires more. It requires us to think about what public opinion is, how we come to know it, and how it works its influence. The little model I develop here is a means to give mood a role in the larger picture of democratic politics. The development is in two stages. First, I lay out policy choice and policy preference as a spatial process for a hypothetical single choice at one moment in time. I then generalize the consequences of that static formulation to policy choice and public response as joint processes over time.

The Spatial Representation

Analysts of the interplay of public preference and public policy, at least since Downs (1957), have found it convenient to imagine a policy space—sets of alternatives arrayed left to right—common both to those who formulate policies and to the mass publics who observe them. The common space locates policy with respect to preference and preference with respect to policy. It is an analytic convenience to make policy one domain (with two aspects) rather than separate worlds. Such a policy space requires a presumption that policy might be spatially represented, that it is amenable to the idea of degree (not kind). It requires also some meaningful dimension on which the degree may be represented.

Individual citizens are presumed to have ideal points, most-preferred choices from large sets of alternatives. Those ideal points aggregated to the level of a "public" form distributions of preference. Usually they are taken as given, determined by individual values and by processes of preference formation outside the dynamic of policymaking itself. This "exogeneity of preferences" assumption is one to which I will return at the conclusion of this essay. Preference distributions are commonly assumed (for simplicity) as some variation from the family of unimodal (single-humped) distributions.² The convenient mathematics of the normal distribution makes it a common choice.

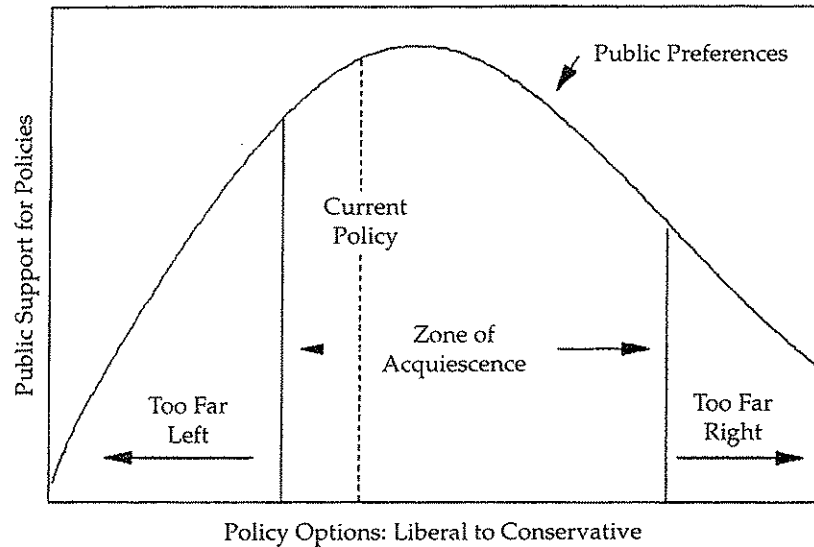
In the process of working through the mathematics of policy preference distributions, analysts commonly assume that the distribution is symmetrical, that it has a central tendency equidistant from left and right extremes. Symmetry is assumed, not demonstrated. Working on hypothetical exercises without empirical referents, analysts adopt symmetry because there typically is no basis for any contrary assumption. Symmetry is parsimonious. And usually it doesn't matter in any case.

Anticipating the longitudinal reformulation of the preference distribution that is to come, I find it useful to make the less restrictive assumption, that in the general case preference distributions are asymmetrical, extremes are *not* equidistant from the center (although the special case of symmetry is *not* ruled out as a possibility).

Presume that public opinion, as seen by professionals in the business of government and politics, consists of a tripartite typology: (1) issue positions too far left for public acceptance, (2) those similarly too far right, and (3) a zone of acquiescence between them—not necessarily exactly in the middle (see Figure 2.1).

The zone of acquiescence is a range of incremental policy choices firmly within established consensus. Because that is so, no public response is to be expected from the choice of any one of them.³ A rational public "responds" when the differences between alternative policies are substan-

FIGURE 2.1 A Conceptual Scheme for Policy Choice in a Democracy



tial, when, that is, they are large enough to justify the cost of being informed and attentive. When differences are insubstantial, it is rational to be uninformed, not to notice them. The public acquiesces within the "zone," then, because the marginal cost of doing otherwise (being informed and attentive) exceeds its expected benefit.

The width of this middling zone is a function of indifference, the degree of which rests on perceived benefits of alternative courses of policy and on the costs of information on those benefits. Where real benefit differentials are modest or information costs exceed what an inattentive electorate will bear or both, then this indifferent portion of the policy space might be large. In other cases, the issue of abortion comes to mind as a good example, the policy space may reduce to unacceptable actions in either direction with no acquiescent zone.

The problem of presenting asymmetry is that it has infinite variations. Figure 2.1 illustrates one hypothetical possibility. Insofar as one can imagine left and right reversed and the degree of asymmetry varied, it is "typical." The hypothetical issue space shows current public policy to be left of center. A limited number of possibilities are still further left. But the area on the right of the status quo is larger, representing both that there are more numerous conservative choices possible (the discrete case) and that the degree of possible rightward movement is larger (the continuous case).

A rational policymaker who wished to minimax regrets (to take that course of action that would have minimum bad consequences) would stay within the zone of acquiescence. Given uncertainty about where the bounds are, one who was also cynical (i.e., willing to sacrifice his or her own, party, or government policy goals) would move to the right in this instance. I am *not* assuming that policymakers do, for the most part, behave cynically.

A real-world scenario that more or less fits the figure is the situation of Ronald Reagan at inauguration. Policy at that moment was, in general, toward the left, if not as far left as it had been, say, for the brief moment of the Great Society during the Johnson administration. And there was evidence of a public restiveness about liberal solutions, a willingness to think favorably about innovations toward the right.

The zone of acquiescence in the general case is asymmetrical; the center need not be equidistant from the bounds. That suggests that it might be the case that at any given time the electorate is more willing to tolerate policy innovation and experimentation in the one direction than the other. The zone of acquiescence notion implies a social awareness of a left-right continuum, although the process can be so passive, so driven by social communication, that most citizens might act with respect to it without being aware of it. This is not by any means "ideology" in the sense understood in the research on voting behavior. That political psychology orientation toward the structure of ideas requires far more than is needed for ideological influence to emerge as a macro phenomenon.

A Moving Zone:

A Longitudinal Formulation of Policy and Preferences

If the zone of acquiescence is asymmetrical, it is a short step to the suspicion that the asymmetry might vary with time. This willingness to tolerate policy experiments more in one direction than the other flows not only from values (which might be practically fixed for a lifetime) but also from strategic premises about the effectiveness of policy approaches and the goodness and badness of particular implementations. These are driven by experience. That makes them changeable, both for individuals and publics.

If the bounds of acquiescence are allowed to move, then (turning the static representation on its side to introduce a time dimension) we can envision a moving zone that displaces up and down with context and public experience with policy experimentation. A zone of such policy consensus moving over time resembles a meandering river, a familiar metaphor of political life.

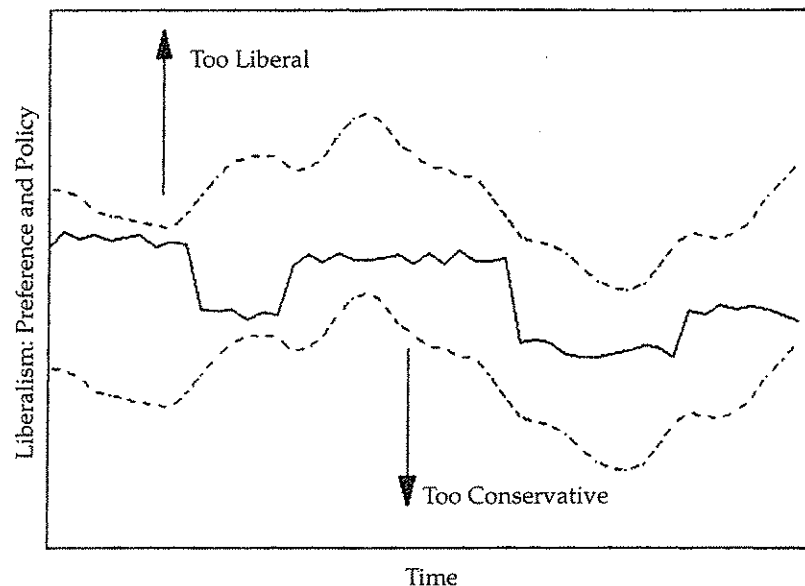
If we allow variation of asymmetry over time, then we would expect to see shifts of public preferences. If politicians sense such shifts—and

everything we know about the species suggests that preference sensitivity is a finely honed attribute—then we have a basis for expecting elite behavior to conform to public mood. We expect, in other words, the acceptable center of political views to meander over time like a flowing river and for politicians to swim more or less where it goes, not to watch it from the bank.⁴

Movement over time in the value component of public preference could also produce something like the meanders of Figure 2.2. But a virtue of the notion of the zone of acquiescence is that we can imagine the bounds of acquiescence to be quite variable even when values are fixed. That produces a plausible expectation of movement over time. It requires no assumption of ideological conversion. To the degree that preferences are heavily weighted by pragmatism, a not unknown characteristic of American culture, the movement over time is all the easier and all the more likely.

Figure 2.2 presents the track through time of a hypothetical issue preference distribution, symbolized by moving bounds. The area between the bounds is constant,⁵ but their displacement varies up and down. Between the bounds is the hypothetical line of real policy formation, represented as an alteration between small incremental movements and occasional jumps of some magnitude.

FIGURE 2.2 A Hypothetical Picture of Policy and Public Acquiescence over Time



How many of these meandering policy spaces ought we to expect? Is there one for each major domain of policy, one for each issue, one for each survey item, or maybe even just one? As an empirical issue, that will merit considerable attention in later analyses. But it is useful to address the hypothetical case here. Rational people engaging in information processing are cognitive misers. They do not pay the costs of complicated information-processing schemes when simple ones will serve their goals well. The usual static case for why a simple cognitive arrangement of ideas should prevail—the extraordinary cost of knowing what one needs to know to do better—is even stronger in the longitudinal realm. For the vaunted complexity of choice in the usual static scenario is about *one* choice at one time. Real individuals confront an ongoing sequence.

If there are n issues of concern to a particular citizen, the cost of information and decision processing, c becomes $n \cdot c$ for heroic individuals who wish to treat each as separate and distinct. And those likely to be willing to bear heroic costs for political information processing are likely to be the very same set of individuals for whom n is very large. Interest in politics produces both the willingness and the n . The consequence is that $n \cdot c$ is likely to dominate the utilities to be derived from complicated information processing across the scale of political attentiveness. Those (larger numbers) at the inattentive end of the scale need economical preference formation because the perceived utilities of politics are too small to justify more elaborate schemes. Those at the attentive end need them because they use them so much.

Here too we need to recall the social organization of belief. We read politics not as facts from a printout but as shared ideas from social and political interaction. We needn't work through the logic of what is a liberal or conservative position on policy x , when friends, neighbors, co-workers, and nightly guests who enter our living rooms through the TV set are there to tell us. And if we borrow our ideas from Teddy Kennedy or Ronald Reagan—or any number of other people who might in turn have borrowed from them—then we borrow a consistent bipolar conception of the world. Individuals grappling with the logic of complex issues might evolve a complex scheme of values and judgments. Borrowers will borrow the scheme that's there. What's there, constantly ordered by a party system offering choices between two options, is a unidimensional scheme, left to right. In politics only very few are professionally involved in issues. Most of us necessarily are on the periphery; most of us are borrowers.

The conclusion that follows this line of reasoning, if not elegantly, is that some summary dimension is likely to produce simple (hence parallel over time) response across issues for many individuals. And what emerges for many individuals separately emerges powerfully in aggregates. This implies a latent continuum underlying expressed policy preferences, a

common cause of somewhat diverse opinions that produces observable parallelism in the movements of policy preferences over time. In other words, it implies that it is simpler to see issues in bundles than each on its own terms and that tracks of issue preferences over time should move together, tracing more or less parallel courses.

This bundling of issue preferences as if the separate issues were not really separate is policy mood. A macro-level concept, it emerges in aggregates. It is seen in electorates, not in individuals. Its roots are *both* in individual psychology and in social communication, and thus it might emerge from the latter even if (hypothetically) totally absent in the former.

Whether issue preferences move together over time is a simple enough matter to observe. That is much of the focus of this essay. As the derivation of expected parallelism is loose, we will see also cases where issue preferences don't seem to be parallel. Getting in and out of wars, for example, has little in common with the domestic policy domain. But the thesis that arises from this longitudinal perspective on issue preferences is that most policy preferences are driven by a latent global attitude set, policy mood. The causal model to be entertained is that the specifics (expressed policy preferences) are indicators of a latent concept, mood, expressing a common attitude set that drives them.

Issue Dynamics: Trends, Cycles, Stationarity?

What are aggregate policy preferences, and what should be expected of them over time and changing circumstance? Policy is the strategic implementation of valued outcomes. Each policy debate typically engages two judgmental components, which values should be pursued (and usually at the expense of which others) and which strategies are effective means of realizing the chosen values.

Values and Value Trade-offs

Of all the influences on political debate in a nation, values are probably the closest to being constant over time. Rooted as they are in the surrounding culture and only mildly the product of political life, we would not go far from the mark assuming values to be constant.

But interesting policy debates are rarely single-valued. They become interesting precisely because they require trade-offs of alternative values, neither of which can be optimized. The whole series of conflicts over the role of government in society, for example, pits unquestioned (probably unchanging) values for public health and safety, environmental quality, and so forth against the freedom not to be constrained by regulation. We

can see such conflicts as single-valued—and the public probably often does—only by a process of adversarial misunderstanding, by denying that trade-offs exist.⁶ In an era of environmental enthusiasm, for example, we might regard the freedom-from-constraint end of the question as so trivially valued as not to be valued at all. But if such were truly the case, and not just a temporary misunderstanding, the issue would be easily resolved, no longer on government's plate. We would choose the valued alternative over the unvalued one, and the issue would be settled for all time, ceasing in effect to *be* an issue.

If we concede that issues usually involve value trade-offs, achieving some by compromising others, the relative constancy of values ceases to be much of an anchor for policy preference, because it is possible—even likely—that constant values can produce variable value trade-offs over time. In A vs. B, we always value both A and B. But changing circumstance might well lead rational electorates to change the A/B cut point, how much A is to be sacrificed to gain how much B.

The painful debate over abortion rights is a prime example of value trade. Except for the purpose of debate over this issue, it seems likely that most Americans do truly value something like a fetal right to life, not as an absolute and for most not as a legal standard, but something to be sacrificed to a higher value, not a thing *ceteris paribus* of no value whatsoever. And so do they value the woman's right to choose what will become of her own body and life, an easy extension in beliefs about the values of similar freedoms where the trade-off is not in question. This is not something to be sacrificed for nothing, only for a higher value. Both values can be constant, yet at the same time the much more difficult matter of trade-off is free to move back and forth over time.

If typical issues are value trades, there remains the possibility of single-valued conflicts. Something must weigh on the other end of the scale or the issue would not be an issue. But if that something is not a cherished value, perhaps only a fondness for things as they are, then we can imagine issues with distinctive life histories. The status quo as a value has an odd property: If the status quo A is changed to "not A," then "not A" becomes the new status quo. Thus the contest "A vs. status quo" temporarily resolved in favor of A is permanently resolved in favor of A *if the status quo is the only value on one side of the equation*. Not at all a common situation, this sort of scenario may be a good fit to two peculiar issues in American politics, the social roles of blacks and women. Both groups were disadvantaged by a status quo of customarily inferior standing when the issues arose. In both cases that inferior standing was sanctioned by widespread belief that it was the natural order of things. And in both the status quo changed, apparently permanently, in the direction of a new belief in equality of role.⁷

What we may expect of the single-valued issue is that once on the agenda of public debate, it is likely to be resolved over the long haul. For it lacks the value trade-off that gives relative permanence to most conflicts. What we do see in these cases is a trend over time toward full belief in equality. These pure value issues (but not associated conflicts over implementing values) should disappear from political discourse in the long haul and will disappear as measured preferences when the numbers preferring inequality become too small for analytic interest.

Thinking and Rethinking Strategy

Policy preferences are not only value conflicts. They are powerfully influenced by strategic thinking as well. Issues are rarely so simple as "What's good?" Commonly they involve determining "what is a good way to get to" valued outcomes—full employment, racial justice, clean air, or whatever. They are strategic. We debate what strategies are useful and economic means to achieve consensual goals.

But strategies are experiential, not a priori commitments. "What works?" is a pragmatic matter. And unlike the values that may be nearly constant for individuals and societies, judgments about effectiveness of policy approach should alter with time and experience. If policymaking is not "experimental" in the sense of research design, it clearly is so in the looser sense of tentative moves toward problem solutions subject to continuing evaluation. We try out policies, and political debate subsequently reflects upon their success. The design for evaluation lacks elegance, but what matters is that we do it. We ask questions like, "Does the improvement in health and safety in the workplace justify the cost of regulation?" In political rhetoric, the answers to such questions usually seem an immutable yes or no. But individuals and aggregates judging thus are subject to cycling, as strategies are tried out and found costly or ineffective. Preferences then are not fixed for all time but are changeable with experience and with changes in social context.

Cycle and Trend

We have in hand a working definition of *trend*. We have a similar need for the term *cycle*. By (public opinion) cycle I mean nothing more than a simple combination of two things, that public opinion moves (that it does not merely fluctuate in place around a fixed equilibrium) and that movement is followed eventually by reversal. This is a weak notion of cycling. It lacks expectation of regularity of period or regularity of amplitude. Successive cycles might be longer or shorter in time. They might be

weaker or stronger in the distance they move from a starting point. And they need not necessarily return to exactly where they started. All these characteristics of regular cycles in the physical world require some exactly repeatable phenomenon as cause. That we do not expect in politics.

Weak cyclical phenomena are ubiquitous. They characterize all sorts of in-between kinds of movements that neither go off indefinitely in one direction (trend) nor always stay in place. They are not cycles at all in a mathematical sense; those require the regular or periodic causes that we have denied of public opinion.

The reversal part of movement and reversal is easy enough to see from data, not a sophisticated idea. But what about movement? How can we know that opinion really moves on some issue rather than just fluctuating? There are technical answers to this question of real movement (integration) or fluctuation in place (stationarity). I wish to stress instead some intuition about the matter.

To say that movement is real is to say roughly that some movement from level A to level B establishes an expectation that the level of the future series is changed. A stationary series perturbed from its equilibrium tends quite quickly to return to it. Genuine movement in issue series creates meander, a tendency to wander back and forth in lazy sequences, staying for years at a time in either the liberal or conservative ranges.

Determining which it is, equilibration or meander, is still hard for the unpracticed eye. For aid we look at a typical meandering series, a Trendex item on doing more for health, and ask what it would look like if it were instead stationary. The meander in a meandering series comes from the moving expectation. It may be modeled as a series S_t , a function of its own previous value S_{t-1} and the current year fluctuation a_t , which we understand to be a combination of both purely random variations (such as sampling error) and of true movements idiosyncratic to year t :

$$S_t = S_{t-1} + a_t, \quad [2.1]$$

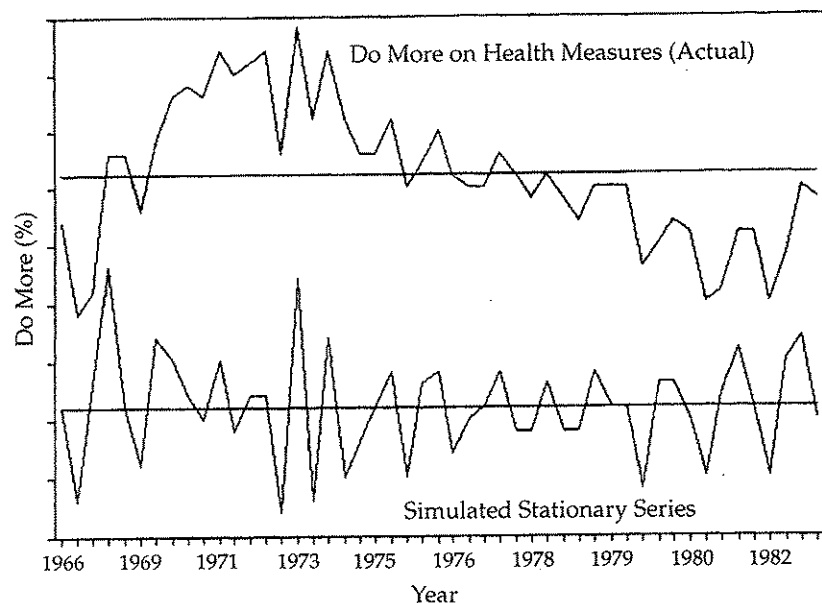
whereas a truly stationary series of the same movements would be

$$S_t = \bar{S} + a_t, \quad [2.2]$$

the whole question resolving to whether the moving S_{t-1} or the constant mean best represents the expected level of the series.

Figure 2.3 illustrates the difference. It shows in the upper portion the actual proportions taking the liberal "do more" positions on the health care indicator. We can easily solve 2.1 for the disturbance term a_t and ask what it would look like if it fluctuated around a constant mean as in 2.2.

FIGURE 2.3 Doing More on Health: An Illustration of Stationary and Nonstationary Attitude Series



That is the lower portion of the figure. That lower portion shows the health series as it would look if it were truly stationary. It shows all of the real variation, that is, except the moving expectation.

With picture and intuition, now we can ask whether the movements over time seem to be movement and reversal or just random fluctuation around an unmoving equilibrium. It is easily seen that forcing the series to vary around a constant mean changes its character considerably, that the bottom of the figure is a different story from the top. The movement is real.

Cycles as Waves

If there is a good physical analogy to the cycles of issue opinion, to movement and reversal, it is not pendulum or orbit. Those produce perfectly repeated behaviors. The ocean wave, peaks followed by troughs followed by peaks, is a closer fit. But some peaks are large and some are small. And the troughs are not uniform either. The cross section is similar, one wave to another, but not uniform. If the average is, say, 50 feet peak to peak, trough to trough, then waves of just 30 or as many as 100

feet are still waves. The concept doesn't require uniformity. But it imposes limits. A 1,000-foot cross section we would call something other than a wave. Regular cycling is associated with peaks and troughs of roughly similar size.

Cycles are ubiquitous in public views of politics. But they are not quite universal. The rare "issue" trends instead. Why it does so and why doing so is rare requires explanation. The familiar distinction between ends and means is the beginning of one explanation.

Ends and Means: Goals and Policies

Few ends are controversial, and so we rarely regard them as "issues" and rarely measure support for them in surveys. If we asked, for example, "Should every American who is willing to work for it have a right to a job and a decent standard of living?" the result would approach unanimity as a cross section and would be a time series without interesting variation. The idea isn't controversial as a goal. It's when we ask about means, what government should *do*, that controversy arises. The goals of political life are numerous. Each is a potential time series. But these are mainly time series that don't exist, because we don't find them controversial enough to be grist for survey research. The few that do exist present a selection bias. They are measured precisely because they are atypically controversial.

When goals become issues in themselves—black's and women's equality, for example—then (and only then) do we measure support for ends. We ask, for example, "Should women have an equal role?" Support for ends in these relatively rare cases probably has no equilibrium level that can be sustained under controversy. One or the other side "wins," and then attitudes move unidirectionally toward consensus. So it is not that value issues tend to trend. Most are stable and monotonous. But in the rare cases where value questions are controversial—which is when we measure them in surveys—resolution (hence trend) is to be expected.

Why are issues as means different? The issue as measured is usually a variation on "What steps should government take (and what alternative utilities should be sacrificed) to deal with unachieved values?" Implicitly, and not uncommonly explicitly, that means what steps *relative to what government is currently doing*.

Absolutes permit movement toward consensus—women should have an equal role, *de jure* segregation is wrong. But relatives—government should do more (less)—are self-equilibrating. If government follows social consensus, then its current set of policies is at an optimum support level. The next steps are likely always to be controversial. If we were to ask for a response to the statement, "Government should do more to

ensure equal opportunity for women in every aspect of life even if it means that men's opportunities will have to be curtailed," we would not expect easy consensus, now or perhaps ever. Policies as means, policies as value trade-offs, equilibrate. We expect preferences over them to move as the values they trade off gain or lose weight, but we expect them never to be resolved. That is why they are interesting.

One can make an empirical assertion about the incidence of issues of the trending and cycling sort. The former are two or three out of a hundred, the latter everything else. This assertion is based upon the decisions of survey designers, for that, not the real political world, is where survey "items" come from. But I see no reason to expect survey design to emphasize the one or the other out of proportion to its actual levels of interest and controversy.

The trending issues are usually not included in the analyses to come.⁸ Choosing to include them, when the direction of their trend is known a priori, tends to force one's results to (try to) fit the trend. Because they are so few and do not share their dynamics with the more common cycling issues, they cannot force a trend in estimates of mood. About all they can do is make well-behaved estimates harder to obtain.

Trend, stationarity, and cycle so far are descriptions of issue series. They are concepts that fit patterns, protocols of longitudinal variation. But *why* cycle or trend or nothing requires explanation. Its character will be brief and suggestive. A full-blown explanation of why public opinion might move as it does is a topic for another day.

Two Stories About Cycles

There are only three possibilities for the development of public mood over time: constancy, unidirectional movement, or cyclical movement. I develop briefly two models of the policy process that suggest, along with intuition and history, that cyclical movements are to be expected. Either is sufficient to produce the result.

Policy Excess. A first explanatory model is an overcompensating negative feedback system. Negative feedback systems, whether engineered, as in missile guidance systems, or natural, as in the auto driver staying in the lane by making little corrections every time the car moves too far one or the other way, have the common characteristic of adjusting to inputs of information about how things are going. The adjustments are negative in the sense that what is observed is error, and so correction is always in the other direction.

Assume that policymakers, both elected and unelected, get satisfaction from the implementation of preferred policies, and a subset of them, elected officials, also seeks election and reelection. The electorate benefits

from and desires the implementation of a preferred set of policies. Assume also that the policy preferences of the mass electorate are not constant but move over time, and further that policymakers perceive that movement, although imperfectly. Then that subset of policymakers toward whom the movement occurs senses the possibility of enacting policies closer to its preferred position. The subset of policymakers who sees movement away from its preference senses possible frustration of its policy goals from action at an inopportune time. As a result, even though no policy actor changes preferences, the net policy result shifts in the direction of the movement of mass opinion.

Policymakers move in policy increments. They move, that is, not to their real preferences (which might be quite extreme relative to current policies and relevant to what the public will accept) but rather step-by-step in the direction of those preferences. At each time, t , $t + 1$, $t + 2$, and so on, they both enact new increments (moving steadily in the direction of mass opinion) and observe the reaction of the public to previous increments. Each observation serves to strengthen and confirm the initial perception of what the public wants. The process continues until some point $t + k$ when the policymakers sense negative reaction, at which point they correct their imperfect knowledge of public opinion and reverse course. This is negative feedback.

Assume that policy implementation produces a full public response only after several periods because policy implementation is not instant and response has a cumulative character. Response to policy change occurs only after the change has been in place long enough for the public to come in contact with it repeatedly. This is a natural result of the fact that the public is inattentive to politics and policy; not paying much attention to policymaking, it comes to be aware of change after it encounters its effects. But numerous encounters with policy change usually will take some time, often some years.

The public also has imperfect information about its own preferences. It is not adept in anticipating the costs of hypothetical policies and therefore cannot with certainty be predicted to continue to support policies once the real impacts of change are driven home. What is the basis for this assumption? Because political rhetoric is unbalanced, rational policy advocates will sell policy by presenting it as cost-free sets of benefits. They succeed often in selling policy proposals to the electorate, the *net* effect of which could not have been successfully advocated. Information about costs and other trade-offs increases after implementation, based upon real experience, leading to apparent flip-flops in public sentiment, caused more by improved understanding than by changed preferences.⁹

Thus the point at which negative public response is sensed is not when policy has gone just beyond what the public wants but rather k periods

later, when policy has continued to overshoot public preference for both time and distance and is now outside the range of acquiescence. The electorate then reacts to policy excess and, in light of new information about policy effects, shifts preferences in the contrary direction, a shift that gains momentum over the k periods while the excess continues to grow before policymakers change course. When policymakers perceive the shift, the process begins anew in the opposite direction until, eventually, it too overshoots public acquiescence and causes another reversal.

The one most essential requisite for all negative feedback systems to work effectively is that the feedback be timely. If it is not, then small continuous corrections do not produce a smooth path. If corrections are late, they will be large and discontinuous. Large, discontinuous corrections produce cycling. If corrections are too large and too late, the character of the cycling becomes ever more violent and unstable.

This model fits policymaking as a short-term adaptive enterprise. The next moves to a longer-term conception and asks what must happen to a policy regime long in place.

Policy Regimes. Presume that policymaking is characterized by regimes, periods in which policy direction is mainly liberal or mainly conservative. Such regimes might be driven by mass preferences, through elections or otherwise, but they need not be. They could, for example, be the incidental result of throwing out a previous set of rascals on performance grounds. All that is important is that they occur and that they are perceived by the electorate to occur.

Regimes always are perceived to fail to perform in the long term. Even if success were possible, perception of failure is likely to cumulate over the duration of the regime. In the worst case, even if policy A works brilliantly to solve problem A, the mass electorate will ultimately reject the regime because it fails to perform on some other problem B (which might indeed only become a "problem" because success on A creates an issue vacuum that needs to be filled by new problems). One can imagine relatively long regimes or relatively brief ones, but it is hard to imagine permanence. Failures must occur, and ultimately they must be blamed on the policies in place.

The natural result must be that the longer a regime is in place, the more it will come to be associated with failure, leading to increasing probability of reversing direction. Policy regimes are thus expected to produce policy moods that cycle back and forth over the long term. The process is not so regular or determined that anything like regular periods of alteration can be expected. But it does lead to the reasonable expectation that a mature policy regime is more likely to experience reversal than indefinite continuation.

Arthur Schlesinger puts it with more color:

Disappointment is the universal modern malady. . . . It is also a basic spring of political change. People can never be fulfilled for long either in the public or in the private sphere. We try one, then the other, and frustration compels a change in course. Moreover, however effective a particular course may be in meeting one set of troubles, it generally falters and fails when new troubles arise. And many troubles are inherently insoluble. As political eras, whether dominated by public purpose or by private interest, run their course, they infallibly generate the desire for something different. It always becomes after a while "time for a change." (1986:28)

NOTES

1. We would still benefit from methodological sorts of theories and models, theories of the survey response itself, see Feldman (1990), and Zaller and Feldman (1988).
2. But see Dahl's (1956) *A Preface to Democratic Theory*, where alternative forms and their implications are worked out.
3. By *public*, I mean here the general public, not including numerically minor groups ("issue publics") so directly involved in process, policy, and consequences as to be responsive to every imaginable policy choice.
4. One can imagine politicians with fixed preferences about policy who nonetheless adjust their tactical views to the currents of the day from the belief that changing the direction of the mainstream requires one to be in touch with it, if not in its center. If we grant the common assumption that professional politicians harbor stronger and more ideological views than the citizens they represent, then the ability to make such tactical adjustments, adopted consciously or otherwise, must be a well-honed skill. This is not a cynical suggestion that politicians adopt views only for expediency—a view I cannot reconcile with firsthand experiences with elected politicians—but rather an assertion that the requisite of influence is tactical adaptation to circumstance, an important component of which is the mood of the times.
5. This assumption too could reasonably be generalized. I do not do so because it is beyond the available data to estimate bounds of acquiescence at all, let alone the distance between them. It is a concept without any but arbitrary measurement in this essay.
6. If this adversarial scenario of public understanding of issue debates is correct, it would lead to the expectation that the ignored side of the trade-off would later give pain and cause its reassertion. If the originally valued alternative becomes similarly undervalued against the pained alternative, we have a teeter-totter pattern of cycling back and forth over the long haul.
7. I do not wish to imply that racial or gender prejudices have disappeared and certainly not that new beliefs in equality imply support for government efforts to

effect a change in status. These are separable issues. What can be shown to have changed is that most once believed inequality itself was right and no longer do.

8. Happily, that decision need not be arbitrary or a priori. Leaving them in the issue matrix for the recursive maximum likelihood estimator, to be developed in Chapter 3, tends to produce communality estimates that converge on zero, giving trending issues no weight in final estimates, whether or not included.

9. The process could be ameliorated by analytic treatment of policy proposals in public media, but that tends to be blunted by the conflict between analysis and entertainment, which is the central consideration for commercial media, particularly television. Analysis makes us informed about choices but isn't entertaining. A profit-driven system of public information, propelled by consideration of circulation or ratings, will therefore systematically fail the needs of democracy.

3

Developing a Measure of Mood

Domestic policy mood is the concept. It arises from a view of public opinion as an aggregate entity. We expect it to cycle back and forth, left and right, as leaders and followers change their views of government policy over time, sometimes believing that particular policies work and sometimes that they don't, sometimes open to that next experiment in the public order and sometimes not.

But we haven't seen this thing, mood. We don't yet know if there even is an "it" that can be said to exist. Or if it is really "them," all kinds of little moods running hither and yon, global only in limited domains. Concepts are cheap. What we really want is a concept and a set of empirical operations that exemplify it. What we want is a measure, and that is what this chapter is about. We ask what the problems are with measuring mood; we find out they are many. And we develop many schemes to cope with those many problems. And we decide on one best scheme. We begin with a look at the raw materials from which a measure is to be extracted.

The Survey Marginals Data Base

The starting point of mood is information on specific preferences. Not quite "raw" data, survey marginals are the descriptive result of individual surveys, the percentage choosing the various possible responses to survey items. The case is each item each time it is administered. The desired final measure is a regular time series, regular in the sense of having exactly one value for each period, normally a year. Such discipline, alas, must be imposed. The data don't come in such a convenient form. Survey researchers ask questions when they feel like asking them, and rarely does that feeling come at regular intervals.

Survey items may be conceptualized as time series. All the administrations of a particular item, that is, form a series, ordered by time. The first