



# The Paradox of Mass Politics

KNOWLEDGE AND OPINION  
IN THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE

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*W. Russell Neuman*



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## Introduction

It is a central premise of democratic practice that the citizenry must be both vigilant and vocal about issues which affect them if the system is to work as intended. How much attention do typical citizens pay to the political world around them? Certainly almost every adult follows issues of war and peace, major economic crises, and presidential elections. But what about some of the more complex and remote issues of economic and international policy?

This is a critical question in the study of mass politics and, as it turns out, one that is far from being resolved. Take, for example, the case of two associates of mine who found themselves on a panel at a recent conference of the American Political Science Association. After the usual polite preliminaries, a pointed disagreement emerged between them. Both men are established scholars and shrewd analysts of the American political scene, and each was amazed at the wrong-headedness of the other. How could a thoughtful student of American politics study these issues so long and yet get it so wrong? I was particularly intrigued by each scholar's version of the encounter as presented to me later, because the issues raised go to the heart of what politics is and how it ought to be studied. The two versions express a very different sense of public opinion and how the political influence process works. These differences define a paradox.

The first scholar argued: "The central fact of American politics is the behavior of the political elite. Washington is everything. The vagary of election returns, of course, determines which of two competing members of the elite will occupy a seat in Congress for a few years. But who gets nominated and, more important, what gets decided as policy in the day-to-day workings of the political process are determined in smoke-filled rooms and on golf courses. Public opinion is the inarticulate and blurry backdrop for the realities of political life."

The second scholar responded: "Electoral politics is not the backdrop; it is the essence, the keystone of the political process. The big issues, such as military, economic, and welfare policy, are influenced by the



electorate's opinions. There is a complex dialectic between Washington and the rest of the country. Elections need not be held on a daily basis to make officials in Washington pay attention. Woe to the young elected officials who think they can play politics in Washington without actively courting the opinions, preferences, and whims of the folks back home. It is easy for the power junkies close to the citadel in Washington to forget that the rest of the country is out there. In the final analysis, if a policy is not based on public opinion, it won't survive."

The first position was put forward by Michael Robinson, who teaches politics at Georgetown University. He finds it rather difficult to imagine breakfast without *The Washington Post*, let alone living outside Washington. He is uneasy about number-crunching survey research. He focuses instead on how specific political issues are perceived by members of the political and journalistic elite and how political interests and influence bear on the decisions made in Washington. Public opinion seems a vague and distant vapor of half-thought-out, half-hearted opinion compared to the broadly articulated views of the political elite of Washington. Theirs are the opinions that matter.

The second position was put forward by Walter Dean Burnham, who teaches American politics at MIT. His professional career has focused on long-term trends in the American electorate, with special attention to the structure of party politics and historical patterns of realignment. He is a walking goldmine of detailed statistical information on American public opinion and voting.

The two perspectives are equally valid, and neither can replace the other. Yet they lead to seemingly incompatible approaches to the study of politics (Kuhn, 1962). The first leads to case studies of political activists, professional journalists, and politicians, designed to find out their view of the fundamental issues of the day and their strategies for political success. The second leads to the study of election returns and public opinion data, in search of trends and the public mandate as an engine of the democratic process.

The two perspectives differ because they focus attention on different ends of a spectacularly complex communications process between publics and elites. It takes a great deal of initiative, energy, perseverance, and financial and institutional support to be "heard" in Washington. Each of these constraints tests the intensity of opinion of a citizen or citizen group. When a staff interviewer persuades a housewife in Iowa, however, to open the screen door and invite the interviewer into the living room, the situation is unique. It has no precedent before the

development of survey research. As the interviewer earnestly leans forward and asks the housewife her opinion of national defense policy, she pauses, looks around the room, shrugs her shoulders, but does offer an opinion.

Until public opinion polling and scientific sampling techniques were invented in the 1920s and 1930s, the voice of the people was the voice of those who chose to speak out—those who voted, wrote letters to editors, went to public meetings, wrote to legislators, or hired professional lobbyists to represent their interests in the corridors of power. Of course, most everyone had a vague sense of public opinion at large from occasional contacts with friends and associates. But since individuals tend to associate with people like themselves, such informal measures were (and continue to be) misleading. The pioneers of survey research were thus shocked, when they systematically assessed the political knowledge of the electorate, to find such low levels of interest and information.

The paradox of mass politics is the gap between the expectation of an informed citizenry put forward by democratic theory and the discomforting reality revealed by systematic survey interviewing. The paradox raises serious questions. How different are the views of those few who actively attempt to influence political decisions on a day-to-day basis from the views of the many who simply monitor the news media half-attentively and occasionally make it to the polls to vote? Do the masses and elites process political information in distinctly different ways? To the extent that there are differences, how do they affect the workings of the democratic process?

These questions are not new. Walter Lippman (*Public Opinion*, 1922) puzzled over how the public could be expected to understand the complexities of international diplomacy and military strategy during the First World War well enough to offer meaningful guidance to their elected officials. Similarly, Joseph Schumpeter (*Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, 1942) concluded that on most political and economic issues the level of reasoning of the average citizen is primitive, even infantile. The well-educated are no exception. He cited the example of a lawyer who has been professionally trained to evaluate evidence carefully and critically as it is introduced in the courtroom. This same lawyer, when later in the day it comes time to read a political story in the newspaper, reacts instinctively and primitively to the facts and arguments at hand. Simon (*Administrative Behavior*, 1945) and Downs (*An Economic Theory of Democracy*, 1957) further developed the theory of how people

make decisions when they have less than full information and limited time and energy to seek it out.

This book takes a fresh look at these issues, paying particular attention to electoral politics. The starting point is the paradox itself. Major election surveys from the period 1948 to 1980 provide the evidence on the character of the average citizen's political interest and knowledge, cognitive style, political opinions, and awareness of central public issues. Although it is difficult to calibrate the minimum necessary threshold of public knowledge, by most benchmarks the level of public awareness is disturbingly low. Yet all studies of decision-making in Washington indicate that an articulate voice of attentive public opinion is being heard. Where is this voice coming from?

Four theories have attempted to resolve this paradox. The first theory, which emerged from the early voting studies, emphasized that public opinion is *stratified*. Although the average citizen may not be terribly well-informed on an issue, there are opinion leaders within the community who are articulate, active, and indeed well-informed. Through a complex, multilevel communications process, the issues are discussed and evaluated, and ultimately public views are voiced, usually by means of the opinion-leader stratum.

The second theory, also based on the early voting studies, emphasized the *pluralism* of public opinion. Each citizen need not be an expert on each issue. There exist issue publics, or groups of concerned citizens who have a special awareness about and expertise in matters which affect them directly. Veterans track veterans' affairs; businessmen track business regulations. The resolution to the paradox is pluralism.

The third theory, which emerged in the 1970s, concluded that the portrait of the unsophisticated citizen is an artifact of the 1950s, which were an unusually quiescent period in American politics. As a result of the polarized politics of the 1960s, characterized by student and urban unrest and the ideological candidacies of Barry Goldwater and, later, George McGovern, a *changed American voter* emerged. In response to the more intense political environment, the average citizen proved to be more politically concerned, more aware of the issues, and more attuned to ideological disputes.

The fourth and final theory, also from the 1970s, dealt with the technical issues involved in the measurement of ideology, issue voting, and opinion consistency over time. This *methodological critique* asserted simply that the portrait of an unsophisticated citizenry is false, the unfortunate result of errors in measurement.

Although each response is plausible and offers a potentially attractive resolution to the paradox of mass politics, each turns out to be fundamentally flawed. The notion of a two-step flow of information back and forth between opinion leaders and the mass public is incomplete and misleading. The pluralism of opinions and interests that exists among citizens does not in fact correspond to a pluralism of political expertise. Nor has the American voter changed, for patterns of knowledge, interest, and awareness established in the 1950s have proven over time to be remarkably consistent. And the basic findings about low citizen interest and sophistication have persisted, despite methodological adjustments and refinements.

The key to the paradox, it turns out, lies in a reformulation of the first theory, the theory of opinion stratification. Most studies of political stratification have inferred this phenomenon from measures of education, participation, or the expression of opinions. In doing so, they risk a tautology. The central issue is the correlation between political knowledge and either opinion or behavior. To analyze that correlation, one must have an independent measure of political knowledge and sophistication, so as not to entangle the argument hopelessly. Such a measure of political sophistication would assess the individual's interest in political life, knowledge of political institutions, groups, and issues, and conceptual sophistication. This index of political sophistication is here recalculated for each of a series of nine voting studies covering the period 1948–1980.

The theory of political stratification, as well as common sense, would suggest that the more sophisticated members of the citizenry have more numerous, stable, and structured opinions and a more clear-cut ideological position. Surprisingly, the findings derived from the voting studies do not support these hypotheses. The relationship between sophistication and these variables tends to be small or nonexistent. This is a puzzling finding, which represents, in a sense, another paradox within the main paradox. As for the relationship of sophistication to voting and other forms of political participation, the expected strong linkage again turns out to be incomplete and nonlinear. It is not that political sophistication is unrelated to political opinion and behavior. Rather, the linkage is subtle and complex. The theory of political stratification requires a major reformulation.

A central issue concerns the origins of sophistication, or how it is that some citizens become relatively well-informed and involved while others are oblivious to the entire political process. Analysis of the demographic

roots of sophistication reveals a spiral process of the acquisition of political knowledge. This is a gradual process in which interest breeds knowledge which, in turn, breeds further interest and knowledge over time. Related issues concern political learning from the mass media and the linkage between sophistication and political alienation and authoritarianism.

Despite the accumulated results of over thirty years of election surveys, there is a nagging sense that the paradox remains unresolved. The system apparently works quite well despite a generally low level of public interest in and knowledge about the political world. A full resolution to the paradox requires a demonstration that the system does indeed work well, which would lead the book into quite a different direction. But the formulation that, under the circumstances, the system works as well as it does focuses attention on how the system works.

There are three elements to an evolving theory of the impact of sophistication on opinion and behavior. The first focuses on the distribution of political sophistication in the mass electorate. It identifies three distinct styles of political involvement, a theory of three publics. The original notion of stratification developed in the voting studies posited a substantial stratum of opinion leaders, generally the better-educated members of the electorate, and implied a gently sloping distribution from the least to the most sophisticated. Actually, there is a large and undifferentiated middle mass, including the great majority of those who have advanced to a college education or beyond. This large central group, perhaps 75 percent of the population, accounts for a number of the surprisingly weak correlations between knowledge and opinion or behavior. At the top of the sophistication distribution is a distinct but very small group of political activists. Their level of knowledge and cognitive style is much like that of professional politicians, journalists, and political analysts. But their numbers are so small, perhaps a few percent of the population, that they hardly influence the results of a representative national survey. They are articulate and active, however, and their views and concerns make up much of what is heard as "public opinion," just as they did before survey sampling was invented. At the bottom of the sophistication continuum is a third distinct group of apoliticals who seldom pay attention to or participate in public affairs. They constitute about a fifth of the population. The key to both the paradox of mass politics and the theory of three publics is a recognition that the bulk of the population is neither political nor apolitical; it lies in between. Most people can be mobilized to political action, they half-attentively

monitor the flow of political news, but they run for the most part on a psychological automatic pilot.

The second and third elements of the theory of political sophistication concern the distinctions between issues and nonissues and between attitudes and nonattitudes. Public opinion has been characterized as a sleeping giant. Most of the time it is passive and unresponsive. But when aroused, it has effects on the polity that are significant and immediate. Government officials and representatives deal with literally hundreds of distinct issues in any given week. And they have some sophisticated knowledge of each issue. They may well have taken a position on many, perhaps most of them. They are also aware that tiny but alert and vocal groups of individuals are concerned about each of these issues. But in the public at large there is awareness or concern about only a few of these issues, perhaps a half-dozen or so that receive prominent attention in the media. The key to the democratic process is the fluidity of the public agenda, the possibility that at any minute what was once the concern of a tiny group of activists may suddenly crystallize the attention of the mass electorate and become a matter about which they do indeed have real opinions and real knowledge. The evolving theory, then, emphasizes public opinion as process, the setting of the public agenda, the process by which nonissues become issues, and, at the individual level, the process by which nonopinions become opinions. Therein lies the key to the paradox.

Each of these conclusions and interpretations is subject to challenge. The line between the active elite and the mass public is not clear-cut. New efforts at the assessment of mass political knowledge may reveal that the pluralism of knowledge and interest extends much farther into the mass electorate than the evidence has so far revealed. These concerns, no doubt, will continue to attract the attention of political scientists.

When Michael Robinson and Walter Dean Burnham met at the podium, each was surprised at the wrong-headedness of the other. Robinson, from his study of Washington politics, was convinced that the balance of power lies in the tiny elite of political influentials. Burnham, from his study of the history of electoral coalitions, was convinced that the balance of power lies where it should, in the electorate at large. Not surprisingly, the answer lies in between.

# 1

## The Paradox

That is the paradox. Individual voters today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists . . . It seems remarkable that democracies have survived through the centuries.

Bernard Berelson

DEMOCRATIC THEORY has never been terribly explicit about the precise requirements of knowledge and cognitive skill that must be exhibited by each citizen for the system to work as intended. But by most any standard imaginable, the low level of political knowledge and the pervasive inattentiveness of the mass citizenry is a cause for profound concern. It is remarkable that the American democratic system works as well as it does, given the character of the electorate.<sup>1</sup> Public ignorance and apathy seem to be the enduring legacy of twenty-five hundred years of political evolution. This is the paradox of mass politics.

Although the political knowledge of the mass population is a central issue of political theory, it has been studied only indirectly. There are numerous studies of attitudes and voting. Inferences are made about voter rationality from the patterns of agreement on issues between voters and their preferred candidates. Sometimes education or media exposure is used as a proxy measure of political sophistication. But there are few attempts to measure knowledge or understanding. The situation is a little like the discussion of sex in Victorian times. Everybody is interested in the subject. There are many allusions to it. But they are all inexplicit and oblique.

Voting researchers have been reluctant to tackle “the more pessimistic

1. It may seem that there is no paradox at all because the political system works poorly and is in need of fundamental reform. Certainly elements of the political system might bear improvement. But this particular political system, in persisting for over 200 years, has exhibited both stability and a capacity for change in weathering both civil and international conflicts of major proportions and numerous political and social crises. Throughout this history both the mass public and the political elite have developed a sense of the dominant direction of public opinion and a shared belief that it ought to influence public policy and that it does. All things considered, notably other national histories, the American democratic tradition has fared pretty well.

aspects of their data" (Burdick, 1959). Gradually, as the result of inference from fragments of data, the low parameters of political sophistication and interest have come to be accepted as a fundamental given of American electoral behavior: "Surely the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys in all countries is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low" (Converse, 1975, p. 79). The massive National Election Study series (NES), administered first by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan and now a nation-wide board of researchers, serves as a central database for this research community. The series includes over 2500 items about the personal characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of a representative sample of American citizens. Yet only ten of these items deal directly with political knowledge. Furthermore, the linkage between knowledge and opinion has not been carefully analyzed. Ironically, the issue of mass political sophistication has moved from a puzzling discovery to a familiar cliché without ever being the subject of sustained empirical research.

Assessing the sophistication of the mass citizenry raises five basic questions. The first question focuses on the salience of politics for the typical voter. What does the accumulated data on citizen interest and attentiveness reveal? The answer is not a mystery, as indicated by the heading "Citizen Apathy." The second question addresses the level of factual political knowledge most citizens acquire. This is the core of what is meant here by the term *political sophistication*. A random collection of political facts is by itself, however, unlikely to serve an individual very well. Facts need to be structured and put in context. Accordingly, the structuring of political thought represents the third question to be addressed. The last two questions involve patterns of political opinion-holding, regarding both the nature of the opinions themselves and their role in the electoral calculus of the typical voter.

### *Citizen Apathy*

Apathy dominates American mass politics. This has probably been true since the time of Alexis de Tocqueville, although in his time, as in ours, one is likely to get a contrary impression as a result of the tiny minority of politically active and outspoken individuals who receive all of the attention. Survey research, however, through random sampling captures the less vocal and more representative citizen and reveals that the public is profoundly uninterested in the political world.



In the 1930s scientific sampling began to reveal the character of the previously silent citizen. The term *silent majority* might be appropriate were it not generally used as a conservative polemic. The early voting research produced puzzling findings: “An assumption underlying the theory of democracy is that the citizenry has a strong motivation for participation in political life. But it is a curious quality of voting behavior that for large numbers of people motivation is weak if not almost absent . . . Most voters, organized or unorganized, are not in a position to foresee the distant and indirect consequences for themselves, let alone for society. The ballot is cast, and for most people that is the end of it. If their side is defeated, ‘it doesn’t really matter.’ ” (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 306).

Berelson’s study documented that two-thirds of the citizenry have only moderate or no interest in politics. The same parameter of interest was found by University of Michigan researchers in the following two elections (Campbell et al., 1960). Such figures are not the result simply of a large number of nonvoters, for 61 percent of active voters describe themselves as only “moderately” or “not at all” interested in politics (p. 31).

The low salience of politics in American life was also noted in research on civil liberties during the McCarthy era. In answer to an open-ended question about problems facing the country at the height of the publicity about McCarthy’s accusations, only 2 percent of respondents volunteered any reference to domestic or international Communism. Although a larger number were certainly aware of the issues McCarthy was raising, only one in 50 thought them important enough to mention (Stouffer, 1955). Another study of American opinion revealed that only 5 percent of respondents’ fears about the future contain any political content whatsoever, as do only 2 percent of their hopes for the future. Their primary concerns, hopes, and fears focus on concrete elements of their personal lives rather than on the abstractions of politics (Cantril, 1965). Only during times of war, depression, or bizarre episodes such as Watergate does even a sizable majority of the mass public seem to pay much attention to political life.

The level of attention to politics is so low in the mass public that events must be “starkly visible” to have an impact on opinions. There appears to be a distinct threshold of public awareness. As a result, impressions of the political parties derived from the Depression and the Second World War continued to influence opinions through the 1950s,