



# A **Theory** of **Public Opinion**

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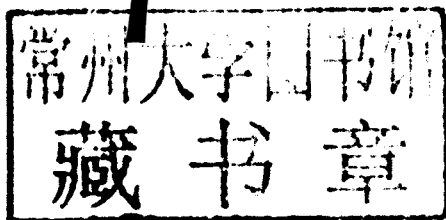
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**Francis  
Graham  
Wilson**

With a new introduction by  
**H. Lee Cheek, Jr.**

*A Theory of  
Public Opinion*



*Francis Graham Wilson*

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# INTRODUCTION TO THE TRANSACTION EDITION

H. Lee Cheek, Jr.

## *Overview*

Francis Graham Wilson (1901-1976), an eminent political scientist, a lifelong scholar of public opinion, and a central figure in the postwar American conservative intellectual movement, was born near Junction, Texas, to Horace Ernest and Stella Jane (Graham) Wilson. He graduated from the University of Texas in 1923, and earned a master's degree in political science the following year. He spent a year as a teaching fellow at the University of California, and a year as an instructor at Fresno State College, before pursuing doctoral studies at Stanford University. After earning his doctorate in political science at Stanford in 1928, he accepted a position at the University of Washington. While serving on the faculty, Wilson was a member of the Executive Committee of the American Political Science Association (1937-1940). During this period he was awarded a Social Science Research Council fellowship to study international labor relations. This research, which grew out of his dissertation, was published as *Labor in the League System* by Stanford University Press in 1934. His *The Elements of Modern Politics*, a theoretical introduction to the study of government directed against the pursuit of "political authoritarianism," appeared two years later.

In 1939 Wilson accepted a position at the University of Illinois, where he would remain until 1967. The transition marked the most

significant period of his scholarship and teaching. During his tenure at Illinois, Wilson assumed a nationally prominent role in promoting the study of political philosophy and humane learning, while also mentoring many students. He would serve as department chairman from 1953-1957. His publications during this period include *The American Political Mind* (1949), a textbook that articulated many of Wilson's central arguments about the nature of the American regime; *The Case for Conservatism* (1951), one of the first defenses of the conservative mission in politics by a postwar writer, which appeared two years before Russell Kirk's *The Conservative Mind* (1953) and similarly defended a conservatism grounded in tradition rather than ideology; *A Theory of Public Opinion* (1962), a major critique of behaviorist methodologies in political science; and *Political Thought in National Spain* (1967), a work dedicated to reclaiming the enduring insights in the Spanish political tradition. Wilson also wrote two hundred scholarly articles and book reviews.

After retirement from the University of Illinois in 1967, Wilson taught at Long Island University from 1967-1970, before moving to Washington, D.C. In Washington, he was a member of the Cosmos Club and he became more involved in political activism, serving as president of Accuracy in Media, Inc., and the Committee on Constitutional Integrity, and as chair of the Catholic Commission on Intellectual and Cultural Affairs.

Since Wilson's death in 1976, three new or revised volumes of his scholarship have appeared as part of Transaction's ongoing series devoted to introducing Wilson to a new generation of scholars. These volumes include a new edition of *The Case for Conservatism* (1990); *Political Philosophy and Cultural Renewal* (2001), a collection of Wilson's scholarly articles; and, *Order and Legitimacy* (2004), a revised and extended version of his earlier work on Spanish political thought.

### ***Challenging the Behavioral Ascendancy***

Francis Graham Wilson was a leading student of American politics, political thought, and public opinion. While a major figure in American political science during the middle period of the twentieth century, he was reluctant to accept every alleged improvement or new methodology in the study of politics, even as he affirmed the need for the continued refinement and the advancement of knowledge.<sup>1</sup> Over

time, Wilson increasingly questioned the drift of American political science away from what may be described as the discipline's inherited philosophical moorings into a distinctly behavioral-orientated academic enterprise. In no area, Wilson argued, had political science generally, and democratic theory in a more refined manner, become less reflective than in the study of public opinion. As both a witness to the "revolution," and as an erudite critic of the evolution of American political science, Wilson derided the new, uncritical reliance upon statistical methods and the lack of attention to the formal, institutional structures in the study of politics. Behavioralism possessed the capacity to advance the study of politics, but its limitations were becoming exceedingly apparent, according to Wilson:

The study of public opinion has almost become in recent times a province of the behavioral scientists. Part of the revolution of the behavioral sciences has been the development of impressive techniques for the study of the public mind. The present writer has no quarrel except in detail with the quantitative study of public opinion. Still, there seem to be areas where there is little respect for the privacy of an individual, or for his status as a rational person with irrational tendencies. His right to know what use is to be made of the opinionative, attitudinal, or emotional material that is taken from him, it seems, is not always respected. Especially is this true where there are ideological and evaluative differences between the technician and the laborized individual.<sup>2</sup>

In *A Theory of Public Opinion*, Wilson provides an enduring critique and refutation of the excesses of the behaviorist impulse, while affirming the historical and theoretical significance of the idea of public opinion for popular rule. Wilson was not opposed to the contributions of the prevailing behaviorist methodologies. However, he recommended the inclusion of all available sources of analysis in order to fully comprehend the relationship between public opinion and republican government. Wilson argued that the root of the problem lay in the inability of the "empirical technician" to "accept the idea of the legitimacy of philosophical inquiry."<sup>3</sup> In his endorsement of the combining of all approaches to public opinion—historical, philosophical, and empirical—to augment a more complete presentation and application of scholarship, Wilson urged a "reconciliation" among the advocates of classical and behavioral studies of public opinion.<sup>4</sup> A contemporary exponent of Wilson's approach to public opinion, Slavko Splichal, has

accurately described Wilson as a “convergence” theorist of public opinion studies, who articulated a confluence of belief “based on different principles, interests, and methods of government adapting to public opinion—so that either public opinion actually supervises government and its policies or government supervises public opinion and monitors whether it enjoys the trust of the citizens.”<sup>5</sup> In chapter seven, entitled “Systematic Techniques,” Wilson articulates his theory of convergence, opining that “[p]ublic opinion by itself cannot be the only standard of political action. There is always a theory of human behavior behind it, and in the end public opinion is itself a technique by which such a conception shares in the creation of public policy.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Wilson and the Recovery of Public Opinion*

This volume represents the most complete introduction to Wilson’s extensive scholarship on the evolution and role of public opinion in democratic political life. Part I surveys the historical development of public opinion and political institutions. Formal political participation preceded the concept of public opinion in almost all instances, Wilson argued. The idea of public opinion and the value of the idea come later. Public opinion is only conceivable when political opinion in theory becomes determinative for the actions of the involved public in practice. If public opinion is understood as a political force, Wilson urged that we must believe that opinion has value in itself, and that it is “a process operating within the public [that] is by definition to be distinguished from those who rule.”<sup>7</sup>

Accordingly, the search for meaning becomes a central problem for the political scientist or political leader who wishes to understand public opinion. The contemporary student of the idea of public opinion must pursue such a clarification because, Wilson writes, “[t]he quest for meaning in the symbols associated with the study of public opinion is torn between those who believe it is somehow possible to say something *ought to be* and those who are mainly, if not exclusively, concerned with utilizing the vast modern array of quantitative techniques simply in order to find out what actually *is*.”<sup>8</sup>

Wilson proceeds to assess the roles of consent, participation, and the historical elements in public opinion, including natural law and theological and political theories, and how the exclusion of these contributing elements to the idea of public opinion has immensely broadened



the influence of contemporary behaviorist public opinion research. Wilson believed in the inclusion of values into the field of study, arguing that “[c]entral to any theory of public opinion is a conception of value formation,” thereby aligning himself with the earlier contributions of Walter Lippmann and Jacques Maritain in opposition to the advocates of scientific theory as the only measure of public opinion, exemplified in the work of John Dewey and his epigones.<sup>9</sup> Wilson suggested that scientific valuations guided by scientific method would supersede moral and natural law valuations as a restriction upon the function of public opinion. Unfortunately, Wilson opined that if the seminal, consanguineous concepts of popular rule and institutions were not assimilated into all assessments, public opinion theory would concede that there was little absolute truth and moral value in the conduct of the state, placing governmental activity largely outside the realm of ethics.

Part II analyzes the development of what constitutes the public, the authentic sentiments of the citizenry, and the complexity of assessing the idea of public opinion. The delineation and elucidation of a definition of the public was essential to the idea of public opinion because “[t]he public is the locus where the drift of symbolism in mass attitudes is arrested by effective decision.”<sup>10</sup> For Wilson, the public is a political and social concept involving groups and the state, but more fundamentally the citizenry.

In Part III, Wilson provides a theory for understanding the contributing elements to public opinion, and those sources of interpretation that might discourage a clearer understanding of the genuine views of citizens. One potential source of the current misunderstanding is the influence of psychology upon studies in public opinion research. Wilson suggested that psychology tended to view opinion as a neutral structure or emotional response with some reflective thinking. Instead, Wilson urged the revisiting of the formation of customary habits of thought, and to a limited extent, political tradition. Indeed, Wilson believed custom may be considered evidence of opinion. Opinion is essentially a matter of attitude, he suggested. First come feelings, then sentiments (feelings guided by rational analysis), and then attitudes or patterns of reaction. Attitudes are an organization of feeling and sentiment into consistent groups.

In the formation of public opinion, Wilson identified many key factors of influence that are certainly in accord with the tenor of pres-

ent-day research in public opinion. He posited that the concept of opinion must be distinguished from the government itself, and that the evaluation of the role of government was even more central. The role of the idea of public opinion must flow from the citizenry, or the public, and when this transpires public opinion emerges. The public, with its opinion, becomes a factor in political control.

Part IV is a commentary on the future of public opinion in American politics. Wilson is most concerned about the nature of the American voting public; the incumbent lack of political participation; and, problems in the formation of opinion. The contemporary student of the idea of public opinion must acknowledge that majority opinion is not synonymous with public opinion. Public opinion, rightly understood, must incorporate both majority and minority opinion. On the other hand, democratic political life has a central problem in accurately detecting and interpreting dominant attitudes. As an advocate of majority rule, Wilson argued that although majority rule is not ethically superior, it is essential to deliberative decision-making.

The substantive importance of a convergentist view of public opinion to popular rule cannot be diminished, although this mode and concept of participation must be examined anew, given the continuing challenges to American politics. Framing his insight in a distinctly American manner, Wilson combined the most salient aspects of American political thought into a theory of public opinion that is both an endorsement of the role of public opinion, as well as an appraisal of the limitations of purely behaviorist interpretive models. In the process, Wilson helped refine our understanding of republican government, but more importantly, the limits of both mechanistic understandings of public opinion and excessively majoritarian, anti-deliberative notions of popular rule.

### *Works by Francis Graham Wilson on Public Opinion*

#### **Books, Manuscripts and Edited Volumes:**

*The Elements of Modern Politics.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1936.

*A Theory of Public Opinion.* Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1962; reprint, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1975; reprint, New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2013 (with new introduction by H. Lee Cheek, Jr.).

*Political Philosophy and Cultural Renewal: Collected Essays of Francis Graham Wilson*. Edited by H. Lee Cheek, Jr., M. Susan Power, and Kathy B. Cheek. New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2001.

"Tolerance and Consensus." Francis J. O' Malley Papers, University of Notre Dame Archives [Unpublished manuscript].

"The Christian Intellectual." Five Radio Lectures, Station WILL, University of Illinois, November 1958 [Excerpt published as "The Christian Intellectual," *Modern Age*, Volume 5, Number 4 (Fall 1961), pp. 361-372].

"Catholic Approaches to Public Opinion." Series of lectures delivered at Loyola University of Chicago, March 1962 [Revised and unpublished monograph-length manuscript "The Catholic and Public Opinion," in Francis Graham Wilson Papers, University of Illinois Archives].

### Articles:

"The Pragmatic Electorate." *American Political Science Review*, Volume 24, Number 1 (February 1930), pp. 16-37.

"Concepts of Public Opinion." *American Political Science Review*, Volume 27, Number 3 (June 1933), pp. 371-391.

"The Inactive Electorate and Social Revolution." *Southwestern Social Science Quarterly*, Volume 16, Number 4 (March 1936), pp. 73-84.

"Peace and War Attitudes of the Authoritarian States." *Proceedings of the Institute of World Affairs*, Volume 15 (1938), pp. 37-42.

"James Bryce on Public Opinion: Fifty Years Later." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 3, Number 3 (July 1939), pp. 420-435.

"Political Suppression in the Modern State." *Journal of Politics*, Volume 1, Number 3 (August 1939), pp. 237-257.

Review of Robert C. Brooks, *Bryce's "American Commonwealth" Fiftieth Anniversary* (New York: MacMillan Company, 1939), in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 208 (March 1940), pp. 226-227.

"James Bryce: The Years of Reaction." *Journal of Social Philosophy*, Volume 5, Number 3 (April 1940), pp. 232-241.

Review of Harold D. Lasswell, *Democracy Through Public Opinion* (Menasha, Wisconsin: George Banta Publishing Company, 1941), in *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, Volume 217 (September 1941), p. 174.

"The Federalist on Public Opinion." *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Volume 6, Number 4 (Winter 1942), pp. 563-575 [reprinted in *Communications and Public Opinion: A Public Opinion Quarterly Reader* (New York: Praeger, 1975), pp. 500-512; and as Chapter Twelve of *Political Philosophy and Cultural Renewal* (pp. 191-203)].

"Tradition and Propaganda." *Journal of Politics*, Volume 5, Number 4 (November 1943), pp. 391-406.

- “Public Opinion in the Theory of Democracy.” *Thought*, Volume 20, Number 77 (June 1945), pp. 235-252.
- “Public Opinion and the Intellectuals.” *American Political Science Review*, Volume 48, Number 2 (June 1954), pp. 382-339.
- “Public Opinion: Theory for Tomorrow.” *Journal of Politics*, Volume 16, Number 4 (November 1954), pp. 601-622.
- “Public Opinion and the Middle Class.” *Review of Politics*, Volume 17, Number 4 (October 1955), pp. 486-510.

### *Notes*

1. For a succinct presentation of the myriad, interconnected scholarly controversies in American political science, see James Farr, “Political Science,” *The Modern Social Sciences*, ed. Theodore M. Porter, and Dorothy Ross (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 306-328; and, John G. Gunnell, *Imagining the American Polity: Political Science and the Discourse of Democracy* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2004).
2. Francis Graham Wilson, *A Theory of Public Opinion* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers, 2013), p. xviii (hereafter cited as *Theory*).
3. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, p. 17.
4. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, p. 18.
5. Slavko Splichal, *Public Opinion: Developments and Controversies in the Twentieth Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1999), p. 97.
6. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, p. 175.
7. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, p. 8.
8. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, pp. 15-16.
9. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38 (quotation from p. 38).
10. *Theory*, *Ibid.*, p. 93.

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F. G. W.

## A PREFACE AND AN EXPLANATION

This volume is a study of some of the important aspects of the history and present situation of the idea, or concept, of public opinion. It is not a study of the history of public opinion itself, or of the changing content of the public mind. Except as incidental to the main interest of the study, the actual state of a public opinion at a particular moment is not directly discussed. In this sense, the volume is a phase of intellectual history, and a study of one of the many problems of political philosophy. It encroaches on philosophy itself to the extent that political speculation usually does.

The study of public opinion is more burdened than most social studies with diversity in the definition of terms and ambiguity in the modes of expression concerning the public mind. A theory of public opinion, as viewed here, is not necessarily associated with any particular form of government, such as political democracy. Whatever the form of government, there is certain to be, either explicitly or implicitly, some relation between what the masses of the people think and what the government does. The lasting tension between governor and subject is the matrix of the concept of public opinion. In principle, this volume is just as interested in ideas of public opinion in monarchical, aristocratic, or totalitarian systems of government, as in public opinion in the

theory of democracy. For the purposes of this study, theory and practice that limit the force of public opinion are as important to the evolution of the concept as theory and practice which seek to expand the force or power of generally held ideas.

Furthermore, it is all but impossible to state immediately what is meant by public opinion. There are so many uses and definitions of public opinion that the subject must be approached with this confusion in mind. So many uses of the term public opinion are naturalized in the literature on the subject that they cannot, except by the most arbitrary choice, be excluded from scholarly acceptance.

The study of public opinion has almost become in recent times a province of the behavioral scientists. Part of the revolution of the behavioral sciences has been the development of impressive techniques for the study of the public mind. The present writer has no quarrel except in detail with the quantitative study of public opinion. Still, there seem to be areas where there is little respect for the privacy of an individual, or for his status as a rational person with irrational tendencies. His right to know what use is to be made of the opinionative, attitudinal, or emotional material that is taken from him, it seems, is not always respected. Especially is this true where there are ideological and evaluative differences between the technician and the laboratized individual. These are hard issues, and the "dangerous knowledge" of the depth manipulators and hidden persuaders, of those who control much of the content of the mass media, and of the subtle engineers of consensus (who but recently were "propagandists"), are all surely legitimately matters of public concern, for power—and today especially psychological power—must be subject to its responsibilities.

The behavioral sciences dealing with public opinion are pragmatic, statistical, calculative, and based on "models." In the nature of the case, the theoretical constructions reached are ideally to be held strictly to the immediate conclusions which may arise from empirical achievement. Whatever the value of the theoretical life, it is severely limited in the behavioral approach to public

opinion, and it is limited because one of the continuing themes of "the commitment to science" is that other means of acquiring knowledge are limited in their possibilities of achievement. As a speculative and logical means of inquiry, philosophy would have then little to contribute to the study of the public mind. The imaginative and logical inquiry is not separated from facts, for a philosopher like Plato was remarkably empirical in his treatment of issues related to the individual, the city, and the cosmos. Though myth may be used to indicate the deeper and symbolic meaning of any level of existence, there should be a combination of fact and value in any significant intellectual inquiry into public opinion. This study is planned on the principle that speculative search is a legitimate mode of study, that it is not inconsistent with quantitative, psychological, or other techniques, if these other techniques are not used as a basis for drawing conclusions which legitimately belong to other areas.

Although the study of public opinion has become firmly a part of the behavioral sciences, it is the belief of this author that the propriety of historical, philosophical, and speculative social inquiry should not be questioned. In the full sense, public opinion must be viewed from a variety of angles, including speculative ideas about social classes and functional groups. The treatment offered here of quantitative and psychological techniques has in mind pointing out some of the theoretical implications of method, rather than attempting to study public opinion with those methods. One might say indeed that public opinion, like any decisive idea, has a history; it is subject to critical thought, and the study of it may have social goals in mind. Further, the study of an important idea such as public opinion is interactive, and no method of study of it should properly stand alone.

In organization, then, this study begins with the rise of interest in the subject as an "idea," not with the existential aspects of public opinion in any given human situation. The origin of intellectual interest in the examination of the theory or idea of public opinion is the first query, and the history with which we are concerned is primarily the history of the concept. Such an insight



suggests the study of the notable ideas and institutions which, in the past, have been an incentive to an understanding of the idea of public opinion. Following this use of conceptual and historical data, we turn to a statement of the "modern inquiry" which leads into the realm of systematic techniques. Any extended treatment of this problem would reduce the significance of philosophical and speculative advances in the contemporary study of the public mind. Beyond this, social theory naturally suggests the issue of how public opinion is carried and expressed in the group structure of society. One is led to a treatment of intellectuals, of course, since they are the formulators and articulators of ideas and policies. Still, the issues of the middle and working classes can hardly be avoided in this age of struggle between conservative and revolutionary ideology. In the final aspect of the study, the value system, the obligatory quality of public opinion in relation to experts, and some general conclusions of the nature of free public opinion are offered.