



POLITICAL
BEHAVIOR
of the
AMERICAN
ELECTORATE



William H. Flanigan

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of the
American Electorate

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To My Parents



Acknowledgments

THE FOLLOWING ANALYSIS AND DESCRIPTION OF THE AMERICAN ELECTORATE is heavily dependent on the work of others. Until recently, extensive analysis of the research findings and data collected by another social scientist was limited to an examination of published tables, but there have been significant changes since 1960. The major studies of American public opinion and voting behavior are now available to scholars throughout the world for further analysis and examination.

These developments in political analysis have depended on the cooperation of many individuals, but the efforts of two men associated with the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan deserve special mention. For a number of years Angus Campbell has opened the archives of the Survey Research Center to outside scholars, and I have drawn on the work of many, most notably V. O. Key, who have benefited from the generosity and assistance of Angus Campbell and the Survey Research Center. Warren Miller has directed the organization and expansion of these activities through the creation of the Inter-university Consortium for Political Research. The Consortium which is composed of the Survey Research Center and about one hundred departments of political science has not only made available the archives of the Survey Research Center to a much wider clientele but has made available other major data collections on the same basis.

This study is completely dependent on Survey Research Center data provided by the Inter-university Consortium for Political Research, and I am pleased to acknowledge my great debt to the individuals in both organizations who have contributed to the establishment of these resources and services. I must hasten to add that neither the Survey Research Center nor the Consortium bears any responsibility for the analyses and interpretations presented here. Indeed the hazard of their

efforts to provide open archives is the sort of reinterpretation and reanalysis which follows, and I can only hope that the weaknesses of this work will not reflect on the general worthiness and excellence of the Consortium and the Survey Research Center.

I must also express my debt to the director of the Social Science Research Facilities Center at the University of Minnesota for his assistance with the data processing and to Gloria Priem for typing the manuscript. Among the many students at Minnesota who helped with the analysis I am particularly indebted to Doug Frisbie, Caroline Harlow, John Pierce, and Nancy Zingale for genially and competently handling so many of the laborious details in the preparation of the tables. Again these acknowledgments do not diminish my responsibility for the errors that follow, but they qualify considerably the credit I am due.

W. H. F.

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Introduction

THE AMERICAN ELECTORAL SYSTEM IS ONE OF THE MOST FASCINATING of all political institutions. Not only do American campaigns and elections provide a colorful and entertaining array of political practices, but in the United States the political party system, the candidates' appeal to the public, and the ultimate selection and rejection of political leaders represent a successful and time-tested democratic decision-making mechanism the equal of any in human history. For all that, the American electoral system does not operate perfectly and in some ways it does not operate well at all. This introductory text is not an evaluation of the American electoral system; rather, it will explore the system's behavior during the past couple of decades. Voting behavior and political opinions of the American public as well as some explanations of these major political patterns are the central concerns of this volume.

The public appears as a concept in discussions of democratic politics and in a general sense the meaning of the term is clear. However, there are a number of different specific ways to define the public in the United States as an analytic focus for the study of political behavior. There are several choices for the meaning of the public: the citizenry, the voters and those who influence policy. First, and perhaps most obvious, is a definition of the public as all individuals in the society who have the right to vote, the citizenry. There are good reasons for using suffrage or the right to vote as a basis for determining who is in the public and who is not. The right to vote is a fundamental element of political power. Democratic political theory argues that the

enfranchised are more influential, more adequately represented than the disfranchised. Presumably the public to which democratic political leaders respond is the political electorate, and if our goal is increased understanding of the role of the public in policy formation and the operation of our government, suffrage is the proper basis for defining the public.

There are several reasons for not being content with suffrage alone to define the public. For one thing, under some circumstances individuals who do not have the right to vote may become important in influencing policy and political leaders. Women, for example, were a significant political force before they had suffrage. They not only exerted influence to acquire the vote but joined in a variety of reform movements. More significantly, under many circumstances large numbers of eligible voters neither vote nor involve themselves in any way in the political decision-making of the community. To better examine the impact of the mass of individuals on the leaders' policy-making, one might define the public simply as all the individuals whose activities or attitudes influence policy in any way. This is a straightforward description of the public for most analytic purposes, but it would be most impractical to determine in a complex society which individuals have any influence on any of the policies of the society. This definition of the public might be used with greater hope of success in studying a single policy decision, but the simplicity of a single decision might be deceptive since, under careful scrutiny, decisions that have appeared independent of one another are found to be interrelated. There is an additional complication: individuals may influence decisions without at first appearing to and without intending to. If decision-makers take individuals into account when making policy, then those individuals have some influence over policy and by our definition are to be included in the public. Having influence by being taken into account can cover individuals who could not exert influence any other way. In a slave society where slaves are "powerless" they may be taken into account by leaders who moderate certain policies or refrain from others for fear the slaves will revolt. The slaves would still not be powerful but they would have some influence and consequently be part of the public.

A third possibility for a definition of the public is the individuals in a society who actually vote. This is something of a compromise between all those eligible to vote and those with some influence over policies. It is relatively easy to identify the voters, say, in contrast to individuals with influence, and the argument for using voters as our definition would be that voting is an act of influence.

The many studies employed in the course of this book have used a wide range of definitions of public and a single definition will not be selected and used consistently throughout. Rather, aspects of political

behavior which entail different definitions of the public will be investigated. No great care will be given to moving from one implicit definition to another, although greater attention to this analytic category is a plausible and desirable next step in political analysis.

MAJOR VOTING STUDIES

It is easy to categorize the major voting studies of the American electorate according to the scholars and research institutions that conducted the studies. The first study of voting behavior and political opinion relying on survey research techniques was directed by Paul Lazarsfeld, who was interested in the impact of mass media on individual vote choice during a Presidential campaign. Lazarsfeld selected a single community, Erie County in Ohio, for his study during the 1940 Presidential campaign, and when he published the findings, *The People's Choice*,¹ it became a major work of social analysis. In 1948 Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson, and William McPhee of the Bureau of Applied Social Research at Columbia University conducted a second political study in Elmira, New York, and published their findings in *Voting*.² Several major findings in political research emerged from these two studies: the cross pressure hypothesis, opinion leadership, selective perception. To this point the important studies were of single communities and conducted entirely by sociologists.

In 1948 the newspaper polls predicted a Republican victory in the Dewey-Truman race for President while a Survey Research Center national survey showed Truman winning, thereby publicizing the more scientific sampling used in academic polling. This success promoted a national political survey during the 1952 Presidential election, which was reported in *The Voter Decides*³ and which emphasized partisanship, issues, and candidate images. National political studies have been made by the Survey Research Center every two years since 1952 and the following analysis depends heavily on these studies up to and including the 1964 survey. The most impressive study, *The American Voter*⁴ by Campbell, Converse, Miller and Stokes, was based mainly on the 1952 and 1956 national surveys and continued the

¹ Paul Lazarsfeld, Bernard Berelson and Hazel Gaudet, *The People's Choice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944).

² Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee, *Voting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

³ Angus Campbell, Gerald Gurin and Warren Miller, *The Voter Decides* (Evanston: Row, Peterson and Co., 1954).

⁴ Angus Campbell et al., *The American Voter* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960).