ethnographic sensibility can better ground our understanding of key political phenomena and simultaneously challenge received wisdom about them.

In chapter 10, Lorraine Bayard de Volo reflects on how two extremely different ethnographic research projects she has undertaken encourage a reconceptualization of where "politics" takes place. In the case of social mobilization in Nicaragua, she highlights the crucial political function that emotional engagement plays. In the case of casino cocktail waitresses in Nevada, she demonstrates how outsiders' preconceptions about power and gender relations can be misleading. Her relationship to the two communities being studied could scarcely be more different; yet each proves fruitful in producing ethnographic insights of fundamental significance to diverse literatures.

SEVEN

Scholars as Citizens: Studying Public Opinion through Ethnography

KATHERINE CRAMER WALSH

Public opinion is a force in its own right. As democrats we know this, or at least hope that it is true; we expect democratic governments to respect and respond to the opinions of the public far more than would be the case under other forms of government. And even though we are aware that political actors craft and manipulate public opinion in democracies (Jacobs and Page 2005; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Lippmann 1922), we also know that they do so in wary anticipation of that same public opinion. In this way, public opinion exerts power over what messages politicians attempt to convey (Key 1961).

At the same time that public opinion is a powerful political force, so, too, is our study of it. We exert power over public opinion, and this has consequences for politics. In this chapter, I discuss the power that scholars exert over how the public and political leaders perceive public opinion. I argue that using ethnography can help us check this power by giving the people we study more agency over the research situation. I do so by drawing on lessons learned from two ethnography-based studies, as well as surveys and conversations with several groups of midwestern state and provincial legislators. Insights gleaned from these studies suggest that inserting a bit of ethnography into the study of public opinion can reveal how the method of polling influences the conclusions we reach and can enlarge understanding of public opinion. It can also perhaps improve the balance between the dual roles we play as both citizens and scholars.

Public-Opinion Scholars' Power over the Public

Political scientists who study public opinion often walk a blurry line between scholar and practitioner. Many belong to the American Association

of Public Opinion Researchers, whose membership includes journalists and professional pollsters, as well as academics. Also, many of us conduct statewide political polls through our university survey labs—polls that journalists ask us to interpret for public consumption. The survey results often become political objects, as campaigns attempt to spin the results. The results affect perceptions of candidate viability and therefore perhaps the outcome of elections (Bartels 1988).

When we choose which topics to include on these surveys, we are also exerting power by proclaiming which issues are most important and deserve the attention of policymakers. For example, in recent U.S. elections, conservative groups or state legislatures have successfully placed initiatives concerning same-sex marriage on the ballot in many states.[1] Some people allege that this is a tactic intended to mobilize conservative voters to the polls (Dao 2004). If this is the case, and we draw more attention to an issue by including related questions in our polls, we are helping to promote a particular political agenda. At the same time, if we choose *not* to ask about these issues, we are supporting yet a different agenda.

Our work also affects perceptions of the role the public plays in political processes. For example, if we delay asking questions about significant social movements until those movements are well under way, we may contribute to the perception that such movements are spurred by elites, rather than by insurgent members of the public (Lee 2002). Since we have little survey-based information on attitudes toward the civil rights movement until after national-level political elites had made public pronouncements on related legislation, we have little data to test the idea that it was African American community leaders, and not members of Congress or White House administrations, who mobilized mass support for civil rights legislation.[2]

Also, the way we construct our surveys influences the picture of public opinion that results.[3] Given the widespread perception that public opinion is That Which Polls Measure, poll responses are taken as facts, not as snapshots in time gathered in a particular context. But this overlooks the influence that question-wording and order can have on respondents. Sometimes we alter the interpretation of public opinion through the alternatives we offer as responses. For example, the 2004 U.S. general election exit poll asked respondents, "Which ONE issue mattered most in deciding how you voted for President?" People were allowed to choose from the following list: "moral values, economy/jobs, terrorism, Iraq, health care, taxes and education." Twenty-two percent opted for "moral values," which led journalists to conclude that President George W. Bush was reelected by a public

that was preoccupied with morality and attracted to the Republican Party because of its alliance with conservative Christians. Careful analyses conducted with the luxury of time and additional data showed this to be erroneous (Burden 2004; Langer and Cohen 2005), but that initial impression likely persists for many.

Scholars of public opinion exert power over the public because we have a great deal of control over a major mechanism by which the public communicates its opinions to people in government: public-opinion polls. The decisions we make about the conditions and terms of this communication are amplified through mass media, shaping how the public as well as political decision makers view the public will.

Is Public Opinion That Which Polls Measure?

The choices public-opinion scholars make in fielding surveys can have negative consequences, but they can also contribute invaluably to policymakers, the public, and other scholars. Scientifically conducted public-opinion polls are the most efficient way of capturing what a large population of people think about public issues. Skepticism about the ability of polls to accurately characterize public opinion is often overblown. People who are skeptical that a sample of a thousand people can accurately describe the opinions of a state, province, or an entire nation ought to tell their doctor to take all their blood (rather than a sample) the next time they have a blood test.[4]

Public-opinion polls also have value because they are easily replicable. The same questions can be asked of similar populations and at different points in time to accurately compare groups or gauge longitudinal change. Polling houses can minimize the effect of the interviewers through carefully training them to avoid interjecting any biasing information while reading questions or answering respondents' requests for clarification. In addition, surveys gather information quickly.

Surveys are also desirable for democratic reasons. Random-sampling methods ensure that surveys capture the voice of people who are unlikely to express their opinion through other channels, such as contacting public officials or writing letters to editors (Verba 1996). The publication of poll results may also allow some members of the public to recognize that they are not alone in their concerns, perhaps fostering collective action.[5]

By designing survey instruments thoughtfully and minimizing bias through careful sampling methods, public-opinion scholars can respect the

public trust. We can also do this, though, by recognizing the merits of alternative methods of investigating public opinion. Currently, the study of public opinion is synonymous with conducting polls. For example, Brady and Collier, in their introductory chapter to a book *dedicated to qualitative methods* (which we might expect to be more open to ethnographic approaches), assume the study of public opinion *is* the practice of polling. In their call for shared standards across a variety of methodologies, they offer the following:

> These shared standards can facilitate recognition of common criteria for good research among scholars who use different tools. . . . By tools we mean the specific research procedures and practices employed by qualitative and quantitative researchers. . . . Methods of data collection are also tools: for example, *public opinion research*, focus groups, participant observation, event scoring, archival research, content analysis, the construction of "unobtrusive measures," and the systematic compilation of secondary sources. (Brady and Collier 2004, 7–8; emphasis added)

Even among scholars who welcome qualitative methods, public-opinion research is equated with public-opinion polling.

But is it the case that public opinion is that which polls measure? Historically, this was not always the case, and for a time this question was hotly debated (Kinder 1998, 780–82). Before mass-sample scientific surveys were common and reputable, people judged public opinion through other means. The Greeks determined public opinion through debate; the American colonists gauged it through pamphlets and newspapers (Glynn et al. 2004, chap. 2). With surveys on the horizon, some scholars anticipated that they would become synonymous with public opinion. Sociologist Herbert Blumer vehemently contested equating surveys with opinion, arguing that if the thing we wish to understand is the force that moves policy, then poll results are not a good measure. Instead, to him, public opinion emerged through competition among interest groups, and could not be measured by individuals voicing their thoughts in isolation (Blumer 1948). V. O. Key was less hostile to polls but nevertheless defined public opinion as "that which governments find it prudent to heed," a definition that does not automatically equate opinion with public-opinion surveys (1961, 14).

Sidney Verba refreshed this debate in 1995 by focusing his presidential address to the American Political Science Association on the merits of mass-sample survey polls. In the current era, polls have become inputs to governance—government actors *do* heed them. And Verba argued that this

is perhaps a good thing: polls are egalitarian. In Blumer's time, what governments heard was a function of who had the resources and the mobilization to make their opinions known. But now, polls communicate a view of the public will that weights each member's views equally, or at least provides a better assessment of the views of a cross-section of the public than any other means of citizen activity (Verba 1996).[6]

The Difference Ethnography Makes

Most scholars continue to assume that public opinion is poll results. Yet there are alternative ways to conceptualize and study public opinion. Public-opinion polls do not capture everything, and in particular they do not capture how respondents *interpret* the issues they are asked to express opinions about.

Perhaps the people who know this best are those who actually conduct the polls—the interviewers. Ask anyone who has ever administered a public-opinion survey by a phone or face-to-face interview what such a job is like, and you will most likely hear stories about the reluctance of respondents to slot themselves into the provided categories, their frequent attempts to qualify or explain their responses, and how the comments respondents make between questions are often more fascinating than their answers to the questions themselves.

My own experience with face-to-face interviewing in graduate school opened my eyes to these aspects of polling and alerted me to the possibilities of ethnography. I conducted interviews for Kent Jennings and Laura Stoker's political socialization study in places my Wisconsin upbringing had not exposed me to: rural areas of Arkansas, Mississippi, and Virginia.[7] I interviewed people in their homes or their workplaces. During each interview, I heeded my interviewer training and stuck to the questions. But when the interview was over and the laptop cover was down, people would often elaborate on their responses and place their ideas in context for me. It made perfect sense to several of them, for example, to vote faithfully for Democrats, even though their policy stances pointed clearly toward the Republican Party. In the postinterview conversations, I was able to ask people how they conceptualized the Democratic Party, and how they understood their own affiliation with it.

Opinion scholars have used creative tactics to study these types of thoughts through surveys. They have employed stop-and-think probes, such as "Still thinking about the question you just answered, I'd like you to tell me what ideas came to mind as you were answering that question.

Exactly what went through your mind?" (Zaller and Feldman 1992, 587). Others have embedded in-depth interviewing techniques into mass-sample surveys to observe how responses shift or take on new shades when people are alerted to additional considerations (Chong 1993). These studies have gone a long way toward revealing the ambivalence underlying individuals' political attitudes and the effect that bringing to mind additional considerations can have on the positions people are willing to support.

But what I valued most about my postinterview conversations was that during this part of my visit, neither I nor the authors of the survey were setting the agenda or framing the range of possible responses. I was at these times primarily a listener and a guest in a person's home and community. As my hosts, they were in command, and they explained themselves to me in their own words. They strung their thoughts together in packages and structures that had meaning to them, if not necessarily to researchers designing a nationwide survey. What they said was inspired in part by the topics of the survey and likely influenced somewhat by the realization that I was a stranger with the authority conferred by a university survey center badge. However, they had the power to relate their personal histories to contemporary events in the manner and order that resonated with their own identities and perspectives. Also, in those conversations, people made frequent reference to their local geographic and political context, something that did not arise during their responses to the survey questions. Listening to how they contextualized their stances within a complex web of understanding moved me closer to explaining, not just describing, those stances.

Researchers could structure surveys to gather more of this type of information. They could instruct interviewers to supplement the data with rich observations of the place in which respondents live (in addition to the notes that face-to-face interviewers are often instructed to make about the nature of the dwelling and the neighborhood), and could strive for longer interview sessions that encourage and allow time to record respondents' own interpretations.

Rather than continuing to center the study of public opinion exclusively on the method of mass surveys, however, we have much to gain by more regularly using ethnography. By ethnography, I mean the act of spending time with people, as unobtrusively as possible, to listen to what individuals say and how members of groups interact with one another, in the settings in which they normally meet, under the conditions they set for themselves. I tend to call this participant observation, and I think of the balance between

the two roles implied by that term in the following way: In this method, the researcher is enough of a participant that she has access to the people she wishes to study and is allowed to remain in the setting in which they meet, but she is mainly an observer. The term *ethnography* has historically been used to refer to the method of spending time immersed in a particular culture, such as the life of a particular neighborhood or community. But with respect to the study of public opinion, I use it to refer to intensive observation of the conversations and behavior among a group of people who congregate of their own accord. It need not entail following one or more of these people into all aspects of their daily lives. Instead, ethnography can be used to observe opinion expression by listening to what people say to one another when they are speaking in their own terms, on their own turf.

When researchers spend long periods of time with the people whose opinions they wish to study, they can make detailed observations about what these people value through noticing the way they spend their time and the topics they talk about and with whom. The result is a type of understanding that is not matched through other methods. When researchers' primary methods of gathering data are listening and observing, rather than administering questionnaires (whether structured or unstructured, closed- or open-ended), what they get is a reflection of behavior that the people have chosen to display. It is a reflection not only of issue preferences, but of agendas and the frameworks or perspectives through which people understand these issues. In other words, when we use ethnography, the people we study are no longer respondents or people who have been enticed to reveal a part of themselves. They *are* themselves, the selves they choose to portray in the environments they choose to place themselves in.

When I had finished interviewing for the Jennings and Stoker project, I began my dissertation research, aimed at investigating the way people interpret current affairs through informal conversations. My plan was to learn as much as possible about this from existing research and then use a mass-sample survey to further my knowledge about the process. I found that existing research on the role of conversations in political understanding was fascinating, but left open a host of questions, such as how these processes work in groups people form themselves, in settings of their own choosing (compare Gamson 1992).[8] So I asked long-time residents of the city I lived in at the time, Ann Arbor, Michigan, if they knew of a coffee shop or similar place where a group of people met regularly to spend time together. I started observing the activity of patrons in a neighborhood corner store many people had suggested, and eventually asked a group of regulars—a

group of retired, white, predominantly white-collar men—if I could join them. I ended up studying them, and several other groups, for three years.

I gained access slowly to this group. I spent time in the store for approximately a month, gradually mustering the courage to ask for their consent to sit with them. As I watched their interactions, I noticed that when their coffee cups began to run dry, one of them would go behind the counter, grab the regular and decaf urns, and pour everyone a round. After several days, some of the patrons started stopping by my table to introduce themselves to me, and I got up the nerve to serve a round of coffee. As I did so, I explained that I was a social scientist studying informal groups and asked for their permission to join them. They welcomed me, albeit with some amusement that a young female wanted to join their group.

For the next three years, I would arrive at the place several days a week about 8:00 a.m., sit in one of the seats, and listen to their conversations. I participated mainly through body language, avoiding as much as possible inserting my own opinions. Occasionally, they would ask questions of me, and I would answer to the greatest extent possible without revealing that I was particularly interested in their conversations about politics (until the last stage of the study). After several months, they treated me like a member in some respects, such as asking me to sign group cards to ailing members of the group. However, I was still the one "writing the book" who was only in Ann Arbor temporarily. My gender alone signaled that my group membership was unique.[9]

Through conducting participant observation of this group, I was able to watch how the regulars, who called themselves "the Old Timers," collectively interpreted politics. Their sense of themselves as individuals and particularly as people of a similar "type"—their social identities—were a main tool they used to talk about current events. For example, someone would mention a local referendum, and they would talk about whether "people like us should vote for this." They would similarly talk about candidates in terms of whether or not they were people who were "like us" or who reflected their values.

To illuminate what ethnography can reveal in comparison to polls, we can look to the way they made sense of women in public life. When I spent time with them, they were represented in Congress by a female Democrat, Lynn Rivers. Their mayor was also a woman. They called themselves Republicans, described themselves as moderates or conservatives, and expressed rather traditional views about the place of women in public life. Many of these views were revealed when their conversations turned to me. They regularly puzzled over my marital status (single, during most of my fieldwork),

and would segue from this into conversations about their daughters' and granddaughters' life choices.

The following is an example of one of their conversations about the role of women in society. On a January morning in 1998, Baxter asked Orville about his recent trip out to Pasadena, California, to watch the University of Michigan football team play in the Rose Bowl, and about his relatives whom he had run into at the airport.[10] Then Baxter asked about another of Orville's relatives, a prominent woman in the community who had kept her maiden name as her middle name.

SAM: Which name comes first?

MIKE: Well, it depends on the situation—she switches them around to her advantage.

HAROLD: Gee, it sounds like you've had contact with her. Did she [do business with the company you own]?

MIKE: No. . . . I wanted to ask her which one she was divorced from!! [Laughs with everybody]

BAXTER: My daughter, she uses both, too. Sometimes she is Susan Smith and sometimes she is Susan Wilson. I have a hard time knowing what her name is.

MIKE [sarcastically, to me, and I roll my eyes and smile]: These women have too many privileges.

BAXTER: At the Rose Bowl, they had a program listing all the people that were there with the Michigan delegation. You should have seen some of those names. All these asexual names. . . . don't know whether they are a man or a woman. Have to ask. Like "Leslie" or "Kelly."

HAROLD: My daughter's name is Kelly.

ORVILLE [to Baxter]: Well, like Tracy [referring to a mutual acquaintance].

BAXTER: That's right. It was [a family name], very common to do that.

In this conversation, the Old Timers talked skeptically about the use of maiden names, and Baxter related this to the use of asexual names. It seems that both were a violation of their sense of appropriate behavior or gender norms. In the context of this group, women were expected to take their husband's last name upon marriage, and they were expected to have traditional, feminine names.

A common theme in the Old Timers' conversations was that many of society's current ills could be traced to the fact that gender roles had been muddied, that more women had begun working outside the home, and that more children did not have a mother staying at home full time. These

attitudes were steeped in their perspectives as lifetime Ann Arborites who had fought in wars, lived a self-labeled middle-class life, lived through rapid twentieth-century changes, and had experienced a time when "life was more simple."

These perspectives had implications for their attitudes toward gender-related public policies, such as affirmative action, and also for the way they made sense of public women like their congresswoman, their mayor, and Hillary Clinton. For example, on one June morning in 1998, someone mentioned "politics" and then the following conversation ensued:

AL: I have a joke to tell. . . . So Bill Clinton and Billy Graham die on the same day. Bill Clinton gets sent up to Heaven, and the preacher goes to Hell. St. Peter notices the mistake and so the two get sent to opposite places. On the way down, Bill sees Billy Graham and says, so what do you think? And Billy Graham says, well, I always wanted to meet the Virgin Mary. And Bill says, "Well, you're too late."

[Laughter, a few people tell other jokes, then Al adds the following:]

AL: Bill Clinton dies and goes to Heaven and he says to God, "I'm Bill Clinton, the President of the United States of America." And God says, "Oh, well sit right here (at his right-hand side)." And then Al Gore dies, goes to heaven and says, "I'm the Vice President of the United States of America," and God says, "Oh well sit right here (on his left side)." And then here comes this blond woman, gorgeously dressed, walks up to God and says, "I'm Hillary Rodham Clinton and you're in my seat!"

[Huge laughter.]

AL: Since [Hillary's] in office . . .

TIM: But she's not in office. . . .

AL: Well . . .

JAKE: You know, I just don't think that's right. . . . You can have influence, but to have her hand in things the way she does. . . .

AL: She's a smart person. . . .

JAKE: You know I think that once they're out of office, she's gone.

AL: You think so?

TIM: I don't know.

JAKE: Oh yeah, she's gone. . . . That is all for show.

AL: Well, I think she knows what she's doing. You know, I think we will never understand—maybe Kathy here will—what that lifestyle is like, what kind of things those people go through. She knew what she was doing when she met him at Yale, she knew where he was headed. . . .

JAKE: Yeah, I think so . . .

These men perceived Hillary Rodham Clinton as a threat to their traditional values, as representative of a lifestyle they did not understand and did not want their family members to emulate. They made sense of public figures like her through the lens of their identity as people of a different, "middle American" lifestyle.

Standard survey questions can get at this, but not as well as ethnography. During my fieldwork, I gave the Old Timers a survey to fill out by hand and return to me. The questions included items about their reasons for spending time in the corner store, political leanings, recent vote choices, and demographics, as well as their attitudes on a few specific issues. I distributed thirty-two of these questionnaires to the Old Timers, and received twenty-six back (for a response rate of 81 percent). One of the items I included was the standard seven-point scale used in the American National Election Studies about the proper role for women:

> Recently there has been a lot of talk about women's rights. Some people feel that women should have an equal role with men in running business, industry and government. Others feel that women's place is in the home. And other people have opinions somewhere in between. [The questionnaire then displayed a picture of a seven-point scale with the ends labeled with these views.] If you haven't thought much about this issue, please check here ___ and go to [the next question]. If you have thought about it where would you place yourself on this scale?

The scale ranged from 1 to 7, where 7 was the most conservative response, "Women's place is in the home." The average response on this scale among the Old Timers was a 3.12 (st. dev. = 1.45), a response slightly on the *liberal* end of the scale. Not a single respondent marked 6 or 7, the most conservative responses,[11] although their responses to other policy questions conveyed a strong conservative tendency in the group.

Over time, the percentage of people in national samples giving the more conservative responses to this question has declined.[12] Nevertheless, if I were to try to characterize attitudes about women's roles among the members of this group using this standard measure, I would conclude that these men held fairly moderate views about the place of women in society. But their conversations and their behavior strongly suggested otherwise. They were folks with traditional social views who regularly struggled with balancing the values they had espoused and lived by throughout their lives and the changing norms around them. Ethnography demonstrates this; cross-sectional public-opinion polls obscure it. If I had used only surveys, I

would not necessarily have noticed that these people actively tried to figure out what behavior is appropriate for women in contemporary society, and I most certainly would not have been able to draw conclusions about *how* they did so, together.

Using ethnography can do more than allow us to see the people we study differently. It enables us to investigate different questions. In the fall of 2000 I learned about a city government initiative in Madison, Wisconsin, where I had just moved, that brought racially diverse groups of volunteers together to talk about race over repeated sessions with the guidance of a facilitator. Since I had conducted my project on informal political conversation mainly among racially homogeneous groups of people, I wanted to examine the effects of conversations within racially diverse groups. I worked with our local Urban League, which had been hired to administer the discussions, to conduct a pre-post comparison group survey study of the effects of the program on participants' attitudes and behaviors. (I also conducted a similar study of participants in the Aurora, Illinois, Community Study Circles.) We measured racial tolerance, self-reports of racial interaction, and interest in engaging in further community involvement. We found very little change, which was not surprising given that the participants were a self-selected group of already highly participatory and relatively racially tolerant people.

However, while administering the surveys, I also conducted participant observation in one of the Madison groups. Although the survey study suggested that very little happened to people as a result of their participation, the actual discussions suggested otherwise: it seemed that something important was going on. Fortunately, I was able to conduct participant observation of similar groups in other cities over extended periods of time (Walsh 2007). The surveys had allowed me to gauge individual attitudinal and behavioral change, but the ethnography alerted me to a different set of concerns. What actually happens when people in diverse groups talk face-to-face about race? How do they balance the strong pull toward unity in our political culture and the simultaneous desire to have their cultural identity recognized and respected? How, collectively, do they get each other to pay attention to difference and yet not exacerbate racial divides? These were questions with equally important consequences for our understanding of the place of interpersonal communication in civic life and the future of race relations, but I would not have thought to ask them if I had not directly observed this communication. Also, the answers were not accessible to me through survey methodology.

Ethnography as a Reflection of Practical Public Opinion

Ethnography can help us move closer to an understanding of public opinion because listening to and observing the expression of public opinion is how many political actors measure it themselves. In local and state politics, representatives rarely have the chance to examine opinions among their constituents through public-opinion polls. Sometimes citywide or statewide data are available, but even then, the number of cases is usually too small to provide insight on attitudes in a particular district. Susan Herbst's analysis of policy making in the Illinois state legislature demonstrates that most officeholders and staffers gauge public opinion through mass media content, interest groups, and direct contacts with constituents. Even when issue polls are available, staffers tend not to find them useful because they perceive that such polls "are used so selectively by the parties for rhetorical purposes," are unable to capture public sentiment on complex and rapidly changing issues, and are a "lowly and manipulative" tactic when fielded by interest groups. They are also skeptical of the results, given potential methodological problems. In addition, polls have little utility for many staffers since the results are rarely broken down by district (1998, 48–52).

In recent years, I have had the opportunity to talk with a group of midwestern state legislators about the way they gauge public opinion. The University of Wisconsin–Madison's La Follette School of Public Affairs and the Midwestern Legislative Conference of the Council of State Governments hold the Bowhay Institute for Legislative Leadership Development each summer for a select group of legislators from state and provincial legislatures in the United States and Canada. I taught a seminar on public-opinion polling and voter opinion formation to the legislators who attended this institute from 2002 to 2005. To prepare, I sent out a questionnaire to the participants asking several basic questions about their thoughts on public opinion and their constituencies, including, "Who are your constituents?" and "How do you determine what your constituents think or feel?"[13]

Their responses are a striking contrast to the prevailing operationalization of public opinion in political science literature. These legislators do not equate public opinion with polls. Across the four years that I taught this seminar, 103 legislators returned the preseminar questionnaires (or 71 percent of all participants). In response to the question, "How do you determine what your constituents think or feel?" only 22 (or 21 percent of the respondents) mentioned polling through responses such as "surveys,"

"surveys I place in the newspaper or on email," "survey in district newsletter," and "sent a survey to every household in the district."[14] Notably, these mentions were typically referring to informal, nonscientific surveys.[15]

However, 87 (or 84 percent) wrote that they determined what their constituents think or feel through talking directly with their constituents. Many mentioned contacts such as emails, telephone calls, surface mail, and faxes. But in these questionnaires, as well as in our discussions during the seminars, the most common method of gauging public opinion was through *listening to people in person*. For example, common responses included "door knocking," "visiting with my constituents," and "when I am out in the community attending events." Perhaps one participant put it most eloquently by writing: "I do a lot of PBWA, polling by walking around."

During the seminar, one legislator said that she actually recruited several trusted staffers to eavesdrop in coffee shops each morning—one in a more liberal setting, another in a more conservative setting—and then immediately report back what they had overheard.

When I asked the legislators during the seminar why they preferred talking and listening to people as a way of reading public opinion, they did not mention the prohibitive cost of polls. Instead, they stated things such as their desire to listen to the way people explain their opinions, to get a sense of "where people are coming from," to probe their opinions further, and to give themselves a chance to respond to their constituents' concerns. Even those who reported that they used surveys typically remarked that face-to-face interaction was a more effective means of gauging what was on their constituents' minds. One participant described these sentiments in his pre-seminar survey:

> A substantial amount of my information flow comes from other [representatives] in my party. In addition, we gather information from polling as well as by analyzing media stories. . . . Perhaps, most of all, nothing replaces talking to as many people from as many walks of life as possible.

Polls are invaluable because they allow public officials to get a sense of what a large cross-section of the public is thinking, but a common sentiment among these legislators was that *talking with people* provides richer and more useful data.

In other words, ethnography is not just a tool that social scientists interested in meaning-making processes can use to study public opinion: it is actually a mainstay of current political practice.[16] It is a basic part of the process of representation at the state level, and it is quite likely even more

indispensable at lower levels of government. This is particularly notable when taking into account that almost all the elected officials in the United States serve at these lower levels of government.[17] If so much of the public opinion that actually matters for governance is what is expressed in face-to-face conversation, we would do well to pay more attention to what it looks like in this form.

Using Methods That Give Our "Subjects" More Agency over Our Research

One of the most often cited critiques of ethnography is that researchers become too emotionally attached to their subjects. I would like to turn this allegation on its head. All social scientists should strive for rigor in the sense of constantly justifying how we know what we say we know (Manna 2000), and continuously asking ourselves to consider alternative explanations and conclusions. But why is it inherently preferential to opt for methods in which we have no emotional attachment to the people we study or, as is typically the case in the field of public opinion, no actual personal interaction with them at all? At the most charitable level, the premise of such claims is that we should have analytical distance from the people we study. But what does this really mean? Often these claims seem to convey that we should be "above" our subjects, that we know more than they do, and that if we actually interact with them, our observations will be biased toward sympathy with their views or concerns.

Such sentiments bring us back to the dual role that many public-opinion researchers play as pollsters as well as scholars. Commonly, public-opinion poll results released by research universities are accused of exhibiting a liberal bias. Given this state of affairs, it seems self-defeating to contribute to the perception that we are separate from, or worse yet, above the public. Why not acknowledge that we, too, are part of the public, and that we have much to gain from treating our "subjects" as the arbiters of knowledge, rather than starting from the premise that people are ignorant?

One concrete way in which participant observation and polling could be fruitfully combined would be to use observation to generate questions for subsequent polls. For example, pollsters commonly decide which public policy topics to ask about by taking account of issues at the top of the news agenda and asking public officials, staffers, and journalists for information on emerging topics. An alternative way to decide which issues to ask about is to physically visit communities across the geographic area we sample from and listen to the concerns people express in the course of their daily

lives. Given that news media regularly cover poll results, and this news constrains what issues policymakers can avoid and what they must attend to, generating poll content in this manner would confer some agenda-setting power on members of the public.[18] Also, merging polling and observation in this manner simultaneously capitalizes on the unique capacity of the method of observation to uncover unrecognized concerns and the ability of polls to characterize stances across a population quickly.

If we spent some time as participant observers, we might find that the viewpoints through which people interpret the political world have merit. We lead ourselves toward a particular set of conclusions by assuming that people are less expert than we are. Why not start from the realization that we do not see the world through the same lens as many of the people we study, and *try* to develop sympathy for those perspectives? We might move closer to understanding, for example, a puzzle that is currently high on the agenda of political pundits and scholars: how people can seemingly vote against their own economic interests (Frank 2005; Bartels 2006). From the viewpoint of a political scientist with ready access to information about public officials' stances and about the likely beneficiaries of different policy platforms, we might conclude that people make ill-informed choices.[19] But if we listen to the way people understand their votes or policy preferences, we might conclude otherwise. Are they really not making sensible choices? Or are they just making choices that do not make sense through the perspectives that we assume are appropriate?

As scholars, we exert power over the rest of the public through the manner in which we study public opinion. We do this regardless of the methods we choose, at a minimum, through our choices about what is worthy of attention. But we are also fellow citizens, and can respect that role by occasionally turning to methods that partially reverse this hierarchy. There is wisdom in the public, in the ordinary person, and the ordinary community, and the arrogance in assuming otherwise interferes with the quest for knowledge we profess to have mastered.

Notes

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1. For example, in the 2004 general election, voters in Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, Michigan, Mississippi, Montana, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, Oregon, and Utah voted to adopt amendments to their state constitution that effectively ban same-sex marriage. Arizona, Colorado, Idaho, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Virginia, and Wisconsin voters decided on similar measures in November 2006. All passed except the Arizona referendum. In November 2008, Arizona passed such a referendum, along with Florida and California.
2. See Lee (2002) for an innovative use of letters written to U.S. presidents as a way of circumventing this lack of data.
3. See, for example, Schuman and Presser (1981); Rasinski (1989); Lockerbie and Borrelli (1990); Jacoby (2000).
4. Thanks to Ken Goldstein for passing along this wisdom from CBS News to me.
5. My gratitude to Lisa Wedeen for making this point.
6. Verba granted that polls are not perfectly representative. An important example of this comes from recent work demonstrating that people with fewer resources are less likely to make their opinions known in surveys (Berinsky 2004) and less likely to be included in public-opinion polls in the first place (Brehm 1993).
7. In 1965 the study interviewed a nationally representative group of people who were high-school seniors at the time, as well as their parents. They were reinterviewed in 1973, 1982, and 1997. Their parents were reinterviewed in 1973 and 1982 as well. Spouses of the class of 1965 were interviewed in 1973, 1982, and 1997, and offspring were interviewed in 1997. See, for example, Stoker and Jennings (2005).
8. Focus groups cannot achieve the objectives I am striving for here. I am advocating research that investigates public opinion as it is expressed among people who meet of their own accord or in the settings of their everyday life (e.g., their workplaces), and it is expressed on their own time (not structured to fit the constraints of a two-hour focus group session).
9. See Walsh (2004) for full details of the study.
10. I use pseudonyms for the people in this study to protect their confidentiality.
11. Two of the respondents did not answer this question.
12. In 1972, 23 percent of the electorate gave one of these most conservative responses, but in 2004, only 7 percent did so. For full results see http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/toptable/tab4c_1.htm.
13. In 2002 I asked the second question using different wording: "When you have made a statement about what your constituents think or feel, what sources and types of information fed into that claim?"
14. It is possible that if this question were asked of people who represent larger constituencies (e.g., U.S. governors, senators, or members of the U.S. House of Representatives), the percentage stating that they rely on polls would be larger. Even at that level, however, representatives do not have the resources to conduct polls of their constituents on all issues on which they must decide.
15. By nonscientific, I mean surveys in which the respondents choose whether or not they are going to be a part of the sample (e.g., by choosing to send the newsletter), rather than a pollster sampling the respondents through a method in which each person in the target population has a known non-zero probability of being included in the poll.
16. The use of "PBWA" is most apparent at the state and local level, but the behavior documented in Fenno's *Homestyle* (1978) suggests it has been (and most likely still is) a staple of congressional governance as well.
17. According to the 1992 Census of Governments conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau, more than 96 percent of all elected officials serve at the local level (Macedo et al. 2005, 66).

18. In the summer of 2007, I began generating questions for the University of Wisconsin's statewide Badger Poll in this manner, through the generosity of an Ira and Ineva Reilly Baldwin Wisconsin Idea Endowment Grant.
19. Bartels (2006) demonstrates that the claims that working-class white voters have defected to the Republican Party are greatly overstated, if not largely mistaken. However, for additional evidence of the seeming dissonance between policy preferences and policy choices, see Bartels (2005).

EIGHT

Ethnography and Causality: Sorcery and Popular Culture in the Congo

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One advantage of an ethnographic sensibility is that it enables social scientists to glean insider perspectives and then take them seriously in constructing explanations. In so doing it also permits us to transcend some of the parochialism inherent in our ostensibly universal theories. Although this chapter is not itself based directly on participant-observation fieldwork, it is firmly anchored in the perspectives and orientations I have acquired by having done such work in the Congo (and also in Cameroon, Kenya, Senegal, and Uganda) over the past three decades.[1] Politics in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC, formerly Zaïre) has always created difficulties for even the most robust theoretical frameworks. The Congo's size and diversity, and the complexity of its political life, have usually defied parsimonious explanation. Empirical complexity, however, is only one reason why our theories have not delivered on their promises. A second reason is even more germane. Put simply, most of the theoretical frameworks that Western social scientists have generated make implicit culturally based assumptions about causality and explanation, about the parameters of the political, and about the nature of power itself. And while these assumptions might make perfect sense in the cultural contexts in which they were originally derived, when confronted with Congolese realities, they are often either seriously incomplete or slightly out of focus. Moreover, this lack of theoretical acuity has obscured the empirical complexities and ambiguities of how people understand political causation in their daily lives.

Among the most pervasive of these culturally implicit assumptions is that all peoples share the same understandings of political causation. This chapter contends that this is wrong. Moreover, I also argue that one of the great advantages of an ethnographic sensibility is an awareness of how culture and context shape the perceptions of individuals as well as their