THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF MASS OPINION

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Information, predispositions, and opinion

Every opinion is a marriage of information and predisposition: information to form a mental picture of the given issue, and predisposition to motivate some conclusion about it. The central aim of this book is to show how, across a very wide range of issues, variations in the information carried in elite discourse, individual differences in attention to this information, and individual differences in political values and other predispositions jointly determine the contours of public opinion. The book, thus, is most crucially about the relationship among information, predispositions, and opinion.

The present chapter introduces and defines these key terms, examines some critical problems associated with their study, and shows in a preliminary way how they relate to one another. In so doing, it develops the intuitions behind the more technical core of the book, which begins in Chapter 3.

INFORMATION AND ELITE DISCOURSE

To an extent that few like but none can avoid, citizens in large societies are dependent on unseen and usually unknown others for most of their information about the larger world in which they live. As Walter Lippmann wrote in his classic treatise, *Public Opinion* (1922/1946),

> Each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth's surface, moves in a small circle, and of these acquaintances knows only a few intimately. Of any public event that has wide effects we see at best only a phase and an aspect. . . . Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine. (p. 59)

The "others" on whom we depend, directly or indirectly, for information about the world are, for the most part, persons who devote themselves full time to some aspect of politics or public affairs – which is to say, political elites. These elites include politicians, higher-level government officials, journalists, some activists, and many kinds of experts and policy specialists. Even when we learn from friends or family members about some aspect of public affairs, often we may still be secondhand consumers of ideas that originated more distantly among some type of elite.

The information that reaches the public is never a full record of important events and developments in the world. It is, rather, a highly selective and stereotyped view of what has taken place. It could hardly be otherwise. But even if it could, the public would have little desire to be kept closely informed about the vast world beyond its personal experience. It requires news presentations that are short, simple, and highly thematic – in a word, stereotyped. Thus, Doris Graber (1984), in a close study of how a sample of citizens monitored the news, found that her subjects "grumbled frequently about the oversimplified treatment of [television] news . . . " Yet when

> special news programs and newspaper features presented a small opportunity for more extensive exposure to issues, they were unwilling to seize it. For the most part, [citizens] would not read and study carefully the more extensive versions of election and other news in newspapers and news magazines. Masses of specific facts and statistics were uniformly characterized as dull, confusing, and unduly detailed. . . . (p. 105)

Lippmann, who remains perhaps the most insightful analyst of the process by which the public comes to form an understanding of complex and distant events, devoted a large section of *Public Opinion* to news stereotypes, or what today are more often called frames of reference. In one lucid passage, he described World War I as it would probably have been perceived by a character in Sinclair Lewis's *Main Street:*

> Miss Sherwin of Gopher Prairie is aware that a war is raging in France and tries to conceive it. She has never been to France, and certainly she has never been along what is now the battlefront. Pictures of France and German soldiers she has seen, but it is impossible for her to imagine three million men. No one, in fact, can imagine them, and professionals do not try. They think of them as, say, two hundred divisions. But Miss Sherwin has no access to the order of battle maps, and if she is to think about the war, she fastens upon Joffre and the Kaiser as if they were engaged in a personal duel. Perhaps if you could see what she sees with her mind's eye, the image in its composition might be not unlike an Eighteenth Century engraving of a great soldier. He stands there boldly unruffled and more than life size, with a shadowy army of tiny little figures winding off into the landscape behind. (p. 8)

As suggested by Miss Sherwin's reliance on an eighteenth-century engraving, Lippmann doubted that individuals can personally create the stereotypes and other symbolic representations – "the pictures in our heads" – by which remote and even proximate events are understood. Rather,

> [i]n the great blooming, buzzing confusion of the outer world we pick out what our culture has already defined for us, and we tend to perceive that which we have picked out in the form stereotyped for us by our culture. (p. 61)

Many of the stereotypes to which Lippmann refers are permanent features of the culture – the corrupt politician, the labor strike, the election contest, the yeoman farmer. But because society is always churning up new issues and problems, many stereotypes are recent creations. For example, research has shown how, in the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment, stereotypes of unisex toilets and women combat troops came into being as a reflection of the

organizational and ideological needs of the contending activists (Mansbridge, 1986). Luker has done similar research on the origins of the Pro-Choice and Pro-Life labels in the contrasting world views of abortion activists (Luker, 1984). A powerful stereotype that has emerged in recent years is that of "the homeless." Stereotypes and frames like these are important to the process by which the public keeps informed because they determine what the public thinks it is becoming informed about, which in turn often determines how people take sides on political issues (Edelman, 1964; Bennett, 1980; Gamson and Modigliani, 1987; Kinder and Sanders, 1990).

Although culturally given and elite-supplied stereotypes may be most powerful in shaping public understanding of events that are "out of reach, out of sight, out of mind" (Lippmann, 1922/1946, p. 21), they can be important even for matters within people's powers of direct observation. For example, Iyengar (1991) has used experimental evidence to argue that whether television news focuses on "episodic" cases of individual poverty, or the societywide conditions that cause poverty, affects the public's attribution of blame for poverty and thereby its willingness to support programs aimed at alleviating it.

Perhaps the most fundamental question about news stereotypes, or frames of reference, is whether the public is given any choice about them – whether, that is, it is permitted to choose between alternative visions of what the issue is. For in the absence of such choice, the public can do little more than follow the elite consensus on what should be done. For example, in the early phase of American involvement in the Vietnam War, the public was offered only one way to think about the war, namely as a struggle to preserve freedom by "containing Communism." Even news stories that criticized government policy did so within a framework that assumed the paramount importance of winning the war and defeating communism (Halberstam, 1979; Hallin, 1986). During this period, public support for American involvement in the war was very strong, and those members of the public most heavily exposed to the mass media supported the "official line" most strongly.

In the later phase of the war, however, journalists began to present information in ways suggesting that it was essentially a civil war among contending Vietnamese factions and hence both inessential to U.S. security interests and also perhaps unwinnable. Coverage implicitly supportive of the war continued, but it no longer had near-monopoly status. Owing, as I show in Chapter 9, to this change in media coverage, public support for the war weakened greatly. Also, heavy exposure to the mass media was no longer associated with support for the war, but with a polarization of opinion that reflected the division in political discourse. Politically attentive liberals within the general public tended to adopt the position taken by elites conventionally recognized as liberal, while politically attentive conservatives in the general public moved toward the position of conservative opinion leaders.

So, when elites uphold a clear picture of what should be done, the public tends to see events from that point of view, with the most politically attentive

members of the public most likely to adopt the elite position. When elites divide, members of the public tend to follow the elites sharing their general ideological or partisan predisposition, with the most politically attentive members of the public mirroring most sharply the ideological divisions among the elite.

These claims about the effects of elite discourse, which are an important part of what this book will attempt to demonstrate, are obviously quite strong ones. By way of further preliminary examination, I would like to give an overview of the evolution of American racial attitudes in the twentieth century. I strongly emphasize that my purpose in reviewing this sensitive subject is not to convince anyone of the final correctness of my view, but only to illustrate as clearly as possible the general vision that underlies the more specific arguments of later chapters.

Elite discourse and racial attitudes

At the turn of the century, the United States was a deeply racist society – not only in the caste structure of the southern states and in the widespread practice of discrimination, but in the political ideas that informed elite and mass thinking about race. Although there was some mainstream elite disagreement on the subject of race, it was confined to a very narrow range. Virtually all white elites accepted some notion of the inferiority of other racial groups (Fredrickson, 1971). It is both distasteful and unnecessary to recount these ideas, but one point is important to the argument I wish to make. It is that racist ideas about blacks – and, indeed, about most non–Anglo-Saxon groups, including Asians, southern and eastern Europeans, and Jews – had the support of the biological and psychological science of that period. Racist ideas, thus, were not confined to an extremist or backwater fringe; they were as common among the nation's white intellectual leaders as among other types of whites. Given this pattern of elite attitudes, any attempts to mobilize white support for black equality, whether by blacks themselves or sympathetic whites, were bound to fail.

By 1930, however, the attitudes of political elites seemed to be changing. In that year, President Hoover's nomination of John Parker of North Carolina to the Supreme Court was rejected in large part because of a ten-year-old speech in which Parker had said that "The Negro as a class does not desire to enter politics" and that the "participation of the Negro in politics is a source of evil and danger to both races" (cited in Kluger, 1975: p. 142). That a single racist speech, of a type that was entirely conventional throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, could become a basis for the rejection of a Supreme Court nominee by the Senate was an indication that attitudes toward race were undergoing a historic shift.

Despite this, race was apparently not a major public issue in the 1930s (Sheatsley 1966: p. 217). Moreover, Gunnar Myrdal (1944), in his massive investigation of American race relations, found that neither the material condition of blacks nor the amount of discrimination they faced were much different in

1940 than they had been in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. To the extent that there had been any improvement at all, it was only because some blacks had migrated to the North, where conditions had always been somewhat better. Nonetheless, Myrdal maintained that a period of great racial progress lay just ahead. White Americans believed deeply in their creed of equality and had come to realize that black demands for equality were justified. He therefore thought the days of white resistance to racial equality were near their end.

Thus, by Myrdal's account, which proved extraordinarily prescient, a change in white attitudes preceded any change in the actual conditions of blacks. What, then, brought about the attitude change?

One can imagine many possibilities, but Myrdal found the explanation in purely intellectual developments. Scientists, who as recently as 1920 had overwhelmingly endorsed the notion that some racial groups were superior to others, had by their subsequent research discredited it. The magnitude of the change in scientific thinking is captured by the following two passages from the work of Carl Brigham, who was for a time a leading authority on race. In 1923 Brigham concluded his *Study of American Intelligence* by claiming flatly that "the intellectual superiority of our Nordic group over the Alpine, Mediterranean, and negro groups has been demonstrated" (p. 192). However, in a review of subsequent research that was published just seven years later, Brigham felt compelled to withdraw this conclusion. As he wrote in the final sentence of his paper,

> This review has summarized some of the more recent test findings which show that comparative studies of various national and racial groups may not be made with existing tests, and which show, in particular, that one of the most pretentious of these comparative racial studies – the author's own – was without foundation. (Brigham, 1930: p. 165)

Reviewing this and other research, Myrdal wrote that "A handful of social and biological scientists over the past fifty years have gradually forced informed people to give up some of the more blatant of our biological errors" (p. 92). As Degler (1991) has recently shown, changing scientific theories of race in the 1920s were part of a much larger scientific movement away from biological explanations of human behavior.[1]

With the intellectual defeat of early theories of racial inferiority, psychologists shifted their research to the stigmatizing effects on blacks of what was now taken to be white prejudice, and to the origins of racial prejudice in various kinds of mental disorders and educational deficiencies (Allport, 1954).[2]

In consequence of all this, the stereotypes used to explain racial differences in material conditions underwent a major change. Until about 1930 these stereotypes stressed racial inferiority as the reason for inequality. Since then the

1 Degler (1991) has also made the interesting argument that the new research was ideologically motivated in the sense that its practitioners were nonrationally committed to the defeat of racist theories. This may or may not be true. But Degler makes no argument that fraud or dishonesty was present in the research, nor does he present any evidence that the large number of scientists who decided to accept the research were motivated by anything other than their own judgments of the facts of the matter.

2 The possibility that white prejudice might have been due, at least in part, to the racist elite discourse of previous decades was not, so far as I can tell, given serious consideration.

dominant tendency of elite discourse has been to blame inequality either on a failure of *individual* effort or, in its common liberal variant, on the effects of white discrimination against blacks. A more profound shift in elite discourse can scarcely be imagined.

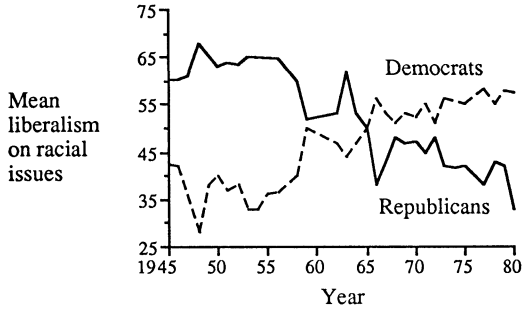
Owing to the lack of opinion data until the late 1930s, the effects on public opinion of this revolution in elite discourse cannot be fully documented. But three points about public opinion are reasonably clear. First, there has been a massive shift toward greater public support by whites for the principle of racial equality. The shift has not extended as far as many would like – most notably, whites have resisted many government efforts to combat discrimination and have been even more opposed to most efforts to make up for the effects of past discrimination. Nor is the sincerity of some people's professions of belief in equality beyond question. But evidence of great change is hard to deny (Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo, 1985). For example, only 45 percent of whites in a 1944 survey said blacks "should have as good a chance as white people to get any kind of job," whereas in 1972, this figure had risen to 97 percent. Similarly, the percentage saying that "white students and black students should go to the same schools" rather than separate ones rose from 32 percent in 1942 to 90 percent in 1982. These changes may have begun to occur at the time of the first mass opinion polls on race in the early 1940s, or the changes may have been already under way at that time. In either case, the shift in mass attitudes roughly coincides with the shift in elite attitudes.

Second, the people most heavily exposed to the new elite discourse on race, namely the better educated, have been most likely to support those ideas that constitute the modern elite consensus on race. Thus, the better educated are not especially likely to support affirmative action or the more controversial efforts to combat inequality, such as school busing, which tend not to have consensual elite support; but they do exhibit disproportionate support for the principle of equality and for those efforts to combat discrimination, such as federal laws against segregated restaurants and transportation systems, that do enjoy mainstream elite support (Allport, 1954; Schuman et al., 1985). Thus, exactly as in the Vietnam case described earlier, exposure to elite discourse appears to promote support for the ideas carried in it. (I present further evidence on the racially liberalizing effects of exposure to elite discourse in Chapter 8.)

Finally, the public has been responsive to partisan elite cues on the subject of race. The evidence on this point, much of which comes from the recent work of Carmines and Stimson (1989), is worth examining in some detail.

Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, elite Democrats and Republicans exhibited no consistent partisan differences on racial issues. The Democratic Party was home to many prominent racial liberals, most notably Hubert H. Humphrey, and had, under the leadership of President Harry S Truman, pressed to achieve a measure of equality for blacks, especially in the military. Yet racially conservative Southerners remained a major power within the Democratic party. Meanwhile, the Republican President Dwight Eisenhower, though no crusader on race, appointed the racially liberal Earl Warren to be chief justice of the

a. Voting trends on racial issues among U.S. Senators



b. Racial attitudes among rank-and-file party identifiers

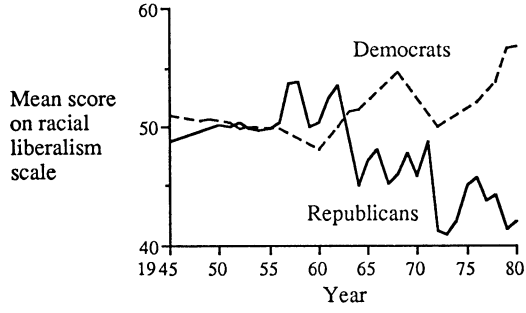


Figure 2.1. Racial liberalism scores of Democrats and Republicans, 1945–1980. *Source:* Carmines and Stimson (1989).

Supreme Court, and used federal troops to enforce its landmark school desegregation decisions. Finally, despite the impression created by such prominent Democratic liberals as Humphrey, Republican congressmen were more liberal than Democrats on race, as shown in Figure 2.1. As a result of this lack of clearly differentiated leadership cues, as Carmines and Stimson argue, Democrats and Republicans in the general public did not differ on racial issues.

Beginning in late 1963, however, the Democratic Party, overcoming the resistance of its Southern wing, stepped out as the party of racial liberalism, while the Republican party became the more racially conservative party. Thus, President Lyndon Johnson, as titular leader of his party, pressed for and won major civil rights bills in Congress, while Senator Barry Goldwater, the Republican presidential nominee in 1964, became the most prominent opponent of this legislation. Also, congressional voting on racial issues began to follow closely Democratic–Republican party lines (see upper portion of Figure 2.1).

The effect of this change in party leadership cues is apparent in the lower portion of Figure 2.1. Rank-and-file Democrats and Republicans began in 1964 to exhibit substantial amounts of party polarization on racial issues – the result, it would seem, of the sudden change in the structure of party leadership cues.[3]

There is, however, an ambiguity in these results. Mass polarization along party lines could have come about from a reshuffling of party loyalties, with racial liberals flocking to the Democratic Party and racial conservatives moving over to the Republican side. This is the *party conversion* thesis. Or polarization could have come about from opinion conversion, that is, existing Democrats becoming more racially liberal and existing Republicans becoming more racially conservative. This is the *opinion leadership* thesis. Although Carmines and Stimson make no attempt to sort out these competing possibilities, it appears that both processes were at work. Petrocik (1989) has shown that, beginning in 1964, the Democratic Party lost Southern whites and gained blacks, which indicates a reshuffling of party loyalties along lines of preexisting racial opinions. And Gerber and Jackson (1990) have shown that many existing Democrats and Republicans also changed their racial opinions to accord with the new party leadership cues, which indicates a mass response to elite opinion leadership.[4]

For purposes of this book, the latter phenomenon is the more important. If elite cues can change racial opinions, which appear to be among the most deeply felt of mass opinions (Carmines and Stimson, 1982; Converse, 1964; Converse and Markus, 1979), they can probably affect most other types of opinions as well.

Conceptualizing and measuring elite discourse

The political information carried in elite discourse is, as we have seen, never pure. It is, rather, an attempt by various types of elite actors to create a depiction of reality that is sufficiently simple and vivid that ordinary people can grasp it. This "information" is genuinely information in the sense that it consists of what may be assumed to be sincere attempts to capture what is most important about what is happening in the world and to convey it in its proper perspective. But it is never "just information," because it is unavoidably selective and unavoidably enmeshed in stereotypical frames of reference that highlight only a portion of what is going on.

In consequence, the public opinion that exists on a given issue can rarely be considered a straightforward response to "the facts" of a situation. Even topics that are within the direct experience of some citizens, such as poverty, homosexuality, and racial inequality, are susceptible to widely different understandings, depending on how facts about them are framed or stereotyped, and on

3 Actually, Carmines and Stimson (1989) find the first evidence of mass-level partisan polarization on race in a Harris poll taken in November 1963, which was just after President John Kennedy declared his support for a major civil rights bill.

4 Gerber and Jackson (1990) report comparable evidence of opinion leadership on Vietnam. Franklin and Kosaki (1989) show that a heightened mass polarization on abortion attitudes followed the 1973 Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade*.

which partisan elites are associated with which positions. In view of this, it is difficult to disagree with Lippmann's observation that while the

> orthodox theory holds that public opinion constitutes a moral judgment of a group of facts . . . [it is more reasonable to hold that] . . . public opinion is primarily a moralized and codified version of the facts (1922/1946: p. 93).

Thus, when I refer in the course of this book to the "information carried in elite discourse about politics," as I often will, I will be referring to the stereotypes, frames of reference, and elite leadership cues that enable citizens to form conceptions of and, more importantly, opinions about events that are beyond their full personal understanding. The aim of the book is to show how variations in this elite discourse affect both the direction and organization of mass opinion.

This conception of elite discourse, however, is more elaborate than can be fully measured and tested in this book. I have sketched it in order to indicate the larger picture into which my argument fits, and to acknowledge that elite discourse is a more complex phenomenon than my simple measures will make it out to be. For my measures really are quite simple and concrete. Often, I will make only a dichotomous measurement – whether there is a monolithic elite point of view on what a given issue is and how it should be handled, or whether there are important elite disagreements over the issue (see especially Chapter 6). In a few other cases, I will determine the relative intensity of opposing elite communications and how relative intensity changes over time. In these cases, I will be counting the number of media reports on a given issue, and the direction in which each report would tend to push opinion.

Yet, as much research has shown, even simple story counts are sufficient to show a close relationship between elite discourse and mass opinion (Erbring, Goldenberg, and Miller, 1980; MacKuen, 1984; Page, Shapiro, and Dempsey, 1987; Fan, 1988; Page and Shapiro, in press; Brody, 1991). And, as the reader will see, they suffice equally well for the purposes of this book.

By way of illustration, let me briefly describe changes in news reports on the issue of U.S. defense spending in the late 1970s and early 1980s, along with the associated changes in public opinion that they appear to have produced.

On the cover of the October 27, 1980, issue of *Newsweek* was the headline, "Is America strong enough?" The inside story began as follows:

> Seldom in time of peace has the United States been so troubled by talk of war – and so much concerned that the country is incapable of waging it. The Army Chief of Staff, General Edward C. Meyer, complains publicly that he presides over a "hollow army," undermanned, undertrained, and underfunded. General Lew Allen, the Air Force Chief of Staff, warns that his planes lack the spare parts necessary to command the skies in any sustained fight. The Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Thomas B. Hayward, protests that he has a three-ocean mission and a "one-and-a-half ocean Navy." And for the first time since the missile-gap scare of the 1960 presidential campaign, a feeling is building that American defenses have slipped – so badly that the nation may no longer be capable of protecting its interests abroad, or containing Soviet expansionism.

After what the magazine bluntly characterizes as inadequate responses to this situation by President Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan, his Republican opponent in the fall election, the story continues:

> There is little question that America's defense posture is not what it could be – or should be. Much of the military's equipment has aged to the point of obsolescence – and even the critical Minutemen ICBM's and B-52 bombers need continuing and expensive maintenance to stay competitive. Skyrocketing operating costs have ravaged the services and hamstrung their training efforts. Low pay scales and increasingly long stretches of sea duty for sailors and overseas tours for soldiers and airmen have prompted a mass exodus of the experienced noncoms who are at the heart of any fighting force. These problems all raise legitimate questions about the ability of the U.S. military to react to crisis and perform in combat.

Stories of this type were not unusual in the late 1970s and early 1980s. By my count, in the 24 months prior to the 1980 election, *Newsweek* carried 57 stories that bore more or less directly on defense spending, 46 of which wholly or predominantly favored greater spending.

A pro-spending posture was not, however, a permanent feature of *Newsweek* coverage of defense issues. As the new Reagan administration began to increase the level of defense spending, elite discussions of the issue – most notably in the form of objections by many congressional representatives that defense spending was squeezing out social spending – changed dramatically, and as this occurred, *Newsweek* coverage of the issue assumed a radically different character. Now the magazine filled its columns with information about multimillion dollar cost overruns, $600 air force screwdrivers, and other indications of Pentagon mismanagement. Instead of images of a decrepit U.S. fighting force, the public was given pictures of a bloated and wasteful military. Thus, in the 24 months following the 1980 election, there were 60 stories on defense spending, 40 of which assumed a posture opposed to defense spending. So, over a short period of time, coverage swung from about four-to-one in favor of greater defense spending, to two-to-one in favor of reduced expenditures.

Public opinion on defense spending moved in tandem with these shifts in media coverage. At the end of the Vietnam War, most Americans wanted to cut defense spending, and as late as 1975, only about 10 percent felt too little money was being spent on defense. But, in response to a steady stream of pro-defense images of the type just described, support for such spending rose steadily in the late 1970s, so that by early 1981, a slight majority of Americans felt that "too little" was being spent on defense. Then, as the news media began carrying a preponderance of information against defense spending, support for greater spending fell by more than 30 percentage points within a single year, leaving public opinion lopsidedly against increased defense spending. Such changes in public opinion, linked to clear shifts in the information carried in elite discourse, are a central topic of analysis of this book, especially the latter half of it.

This section has suggested why and how elite discourse affects mass opinion. The next section will consider more carefully which members of the public are most susceptible to elite influence.

MASS ATTENTION TO ELITE DISCOURSE

Although most Americans are, to use Downs's (1957) apt phrase, rationally ignorant about politics, they differ greatly in the degree of their ignorance. There is a small but important minority of the public that pays great attention to politics and is well informed about it. Members of this minority can recognize important U.S. senators on sight, accurately recount each day's leading news stories, and keep track of the major events in Washington and other world capitals. They are, thus, heavily exposed to elite discourse about politics.

Any attempt to gauge the absolute size of this highly informed minority is essentially arbitrary (though see Bennett, 1989; Smith, 1989; Delli Carpini and Keeter, in press). Nonetheless, one indication of size is that when respondents to a National Election Study were asked to name as many members of the U.S. Supreme Court as they could remember, about 1.9 percent of the public could mention as many as half of the members, and a disproportionate number of those who could do so were lawyers or educators.[5] Few Americans, it appears, are deeply familiar with the operation of their government. (By way of comparison, it is interesting to speculate what percentage of adults can name five or more starters on their city's major league baseball team; almost certainly, the figure is above 1.9 percent.)

At the other end of the attentiveness spectrum is a larger group of people who possess almost no current information about politics. In late 1986, for example, when George Bush was halfway into his second term as vice-president of the United States, 24 percent of the general public either failed to recognize his name or could not say what office he held.[6] People at this level of inattentiveness can have only the haziest idea of the policy alternatives about which pollsters regularly ask them to state opinions, and such ideas as they do have must often be relatively innocent of the effects of exposure to elite discourse.

Most citizens, of course, fall between these extremes.[7] Probably from some combination of civic obligation and the entertainment value of politics, a majority pays enough attention to public affairs to learn something about it. But even so, it is easy to underestimate how little typical Americans know about even the most prominent political events – and also how quickly they forget what for a time they do understand. For example, in the spring of 1989, the speaker of the House of Representatives, James Wright, resigned the speaker-

5 No person among the 1,500 respondents to the 1966 National Election Study survey named all nine justices.

6 1986 National Election Study.

7 Neuman (1986) attempts to be more precise than I am about the distribution of awareness in the general public. (See more generally Tichenor, Donohue, and Olien, 1970; Delli Carpini and Keeter, in press; Bennett, 1989; Just, Neuman, and Crigler, 1989.)

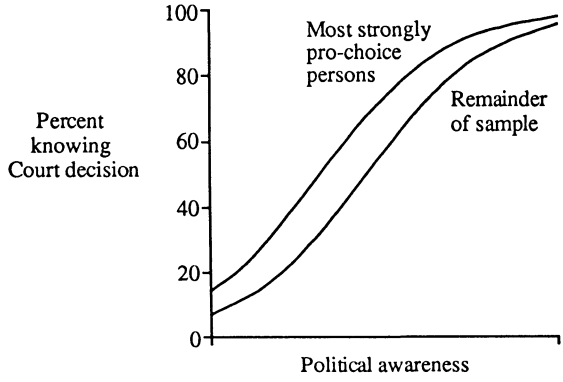


Figure 2.2. Estimated diffusion of news about Supreme Court decision on Webster. Estimates are for respondents interviewed three days after the Supreme Court's decision in the Webster case, as calculated from model and coefficients in Price and Zaller, 1990. Political awareness is measured by means of simple factual questions about politics, as described in the Measures Appendix. The awareness measure in this figure runs ±2 SD. *Source:* 1989 NES pilot survey.

ship amid allegations of scandal, the first time in American history that this had happened. The story was heavily covered in the media over a period of several months. Yet when, about three weeks after Wright's resignation, a national sample was asked about his resignation, only 45 percent could supply any reason for the resignation – even so much as a bare mention of scandal or wrongdoing. Or to take one other example: In the early summer of 1989, the U.S. Supreme Court announced a major decision on women's right to abortion, *Webster v. Reproductive Services.* Because pro- and antiabortion activists held large-scale demonstrations in an attempt to lobby the Court, there was extensive news coverage of the impending decision in the weeks before it was taken, and very heavy coverage when the decision was finally announced. Yet, in a survey done just after the decision, only about 50 percent of the public could say anything at all about how the Court had ruled, and, as the survey continued over the next several weeks, this percentage fell gradually to about 35 percent (Zaller and Price, 1990).

Those who did learn about the abortion decision were obviously not a random 50 percent of the population: Citizens who paid regular attention to politics were far more likely to learn about the abortion decision than those who didn't. Figure 2.2 makes this point. Respondents to the survey were rated according to their general background levels of "political awareness." Persons scored high on political awareness if they were able to correctly answer a variety of simple factual information tests (such as which political party controls the House of Representatives), whereas persons scored low on awareness if they could answer none of these questions. As can be seen in the figure, almost all of the most highly

informed persons – upward of 95 percent of those interviewed within the first three days of the Court's decision – could, when asked, supply the rudiments of the Court's ruling in the abortion case; but almost none of the persons at the low end of the awareness spectrum had absorbed any information about the decision.

Data such as these on differential attentiveness to political news have immense implications for the impact of elite discourse on mass opinion, and taking systematic account of them will be a central task of this book.

Figure 2.2 also shows that the people most strongly committed to women's right to abortion – in particular, the minority who said women should have an absolute right to decide for themselves whether to get abortions – were more likely to find out about the court decision than other persons. Yet their informational advantage was rather modest. There was, moreover, no difference at all between men and women in awareness of the decision. Even women of childbearing age did not differ from the rest of the public in their awareness of this issue (Price and Zaller, 1990). I mention this in order to give pause to readers who may suspect that, although citizens are often poorly informed about politics in general, they still manage to learn about matters that are especially important to them. Although there is some tendency for this to occur, as emphasized in Converse (1964), Iyengar (1990), Delli Carpini and Keeter (1990), McGraw and Pinney (1990), and some other studies, the tendency appears not to be very great or very widespread (Price and Zaller, 1990).

The two main points about political awareness, then, are (1) that people vary greatly in their general attentiveness to politics, regardless of particular issues; and (2) that average overall levels of information are quite low. More succinctly, there is high variance in political awareness around a generally low mean.

These points are widely familiar to professional students of public opinion (Converse, 1975; Kinder and Sears, 1985; Luskin, 1987; Bennett, 1989). Yet familiarity is often as far as it goes. Most of the time, when scholars attempt to explain public opinion and voting behavior, they build models that implicitly assume all citizens to be adequately and about equally informed about politics, and hence to differ mainly in their preferences and interests. In other words, they build models that ignore the effects of political awareness.[8] One aim of this book is to provide a corrective for this dominant research practice.

It may be useful to give an example of why a corrective is needed. The example concerns the effects of campaigns on voting behavior in congressional elections, but the issues it raises parallel those concerning the effect of elite discourse on public opinion generally.

One of the most heavily researched problems in the congressional elections literature in recent years has been the advantage enjoyed by incumbents in the House of Representatives in their reelection bids. The average winning margin

8 Among the exceptions are Stimson (1975), Nie, Verba, and Petrocik (1976), and their assorted critics. Studies done by psychologists and psychologically oriented political scientists pay somewhat more attention to political awareness, often referring to it as "political expertise" (see Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Kinder and Sanders, 1990; and the 1990 volume of essays edited by Krosnick).

has increased dramatically in the past three decades, with the result that most House seats appear safe for the incumbent. House members have been able, by dint of their own efforts, to build a "personal vote" that is loyal to them regardless of partisan considerations. Thus it sometimes happens that a seat will be safe for a particular incumbent for a decade or more, but that when the incumbent retires, the seat will quickly become safe for a person of the opposite party. This development has given House members an independent standing that is almost unique among legislators in Western democracies and that seems to have vitally affected the performance of the American Congress (Cain, Ferejohn, and Fiorina, 1987; Jacobson, 1991).

The reason for the rise of the personal vote, however, remains somewhat unclear. Less than half of the eligible electorate can recall the name of their congressional representative, and this figure has not changed in the period in which incumbents have become safer. But although most people cannot *recall* their incumbent's name, about 80 percent can *recognize* it. This discovery has become the basis for a claim that much of an incumbent's advantage occurs in the voting booth where voters are asked only to recognize rather than to recall who is serving as their member of Congress (Mann and Wolfinger, 1980).

The typical congressional election, thus, takes place in a low-information environment in which a few people know the name of the incumbent and perhaps something about his or her record; many others can, with a prompt, recognize the incumbent's name and perhaps hazily recall one or two facts about the person's record or background; and still others know nothing at all about the incumbent.

These differences in political awareness greatly affect the capacity of incumbents to develop a "personal vote" among their constituents – and yet they are typically ignored in research on the subject. In consequence, the dynamics of the personal vote have remained murky. To preview arguments that are more fully developed in Chapter 10, the people who know most about politics in general are also most heavily exposed to the incumbent's self-promotional efforts. Yet, as political sophisticates, they are also better able to evaluate and critically scrutinize the new information they encounter. So in the end, highly aware persons tend to be little affected by incumbent campaigns. If they share the party and values of the incumbent, they will support the incumbent whether he or she campaigns vigorously or not; if they do not share the incumbent's values, they will refuse to support him or her no matter how hard he campaigns. Meanwhile, at the low end of the awareness spectrum, those who pay little attention to politics tend to get little or no information about congressional politics. Hence they are also relatively unaffected by the efforts of the incumbent to build a personal following. This leaves the moderately aware most susceptible to influence: They pay enough attention to be exposed to the blandishments of the incumbent but lack the resources to resist.

Evidence on this point is shown in Figure 2.3, which depicts the relationship between political awareness and the chances that people will desert their own party to vote for an incumbent member of Congress rather than their own

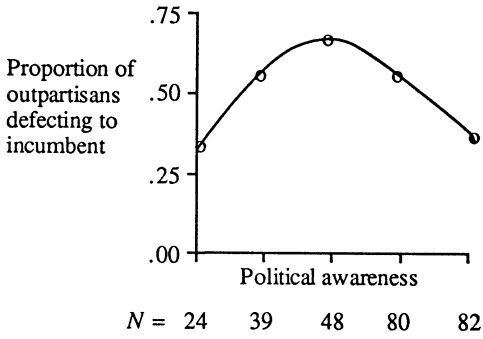


Figure 2.3. Defections to House incumbent among partisans of outparty. See the Measures Appendix for a description of the measure of political awareness. *Source:* 1978 NES survey.

party's candidate. The data involve contested seats in the 1978 general election. As can be seen, defection rates to the incumbent are markedly higher among moderately aware persons than among persons at the extremes of either high or low awareness.[9]

Note that if, as some researchers have done, one checks for a linear relationship in these data, one will discover little of interest. Awareness has strong effects, but its relationship with vote defection is nonmonotonic. (A relationship is said to be nonmonotonic when the association between variables is positive over part of the range of the independent variable and negative over the other part, as in Figure 2.3.)

What is true of congressional elections is true of numerous other cases: Political awareness has important effects on many aspects of public opinion and voting behavior, but these effects are often strongly nonlinear. This makes them difficult to detect and model.

Nonlinearity is, however, far from the only complication in detecting the effects of political awareness. In the example just discussed, we were concerned with the effects of a single political campaign, that of the congressional incumbent. Obviously, this is a highly simplified account of electoral politics. In most congressional elections, there are two main campaigns, each having some capacity to reach and mobilize sympathetic persons (though that of the incumbent nearly always has more).

The same holds true in other mass persuasion situations. Public opinion is sometimes formed by streams of a monolithically one-sided elite discourse, but, more often, it is shaped by multiple and typically conflicting information flows, some of which are more intense, or easier to learn about, than others. Under-

9 There are three reasons for the small number of cases in Figure 2.3: First, the voting rate in off-year congressional elections is relatively low, even among NES respondents; second, the figure involves only members of the party not holding the given congressional seat; and third, uncontested and open seat races have been eliminated.

standing the effects of elite discourse on preference formation requires modeling the effects of awareness in mediating exposure to each of the major campaign messages in the environment, a task that presents serious complications.

A final complication, as has already been suggested, is that opinion formation is a multistage process, and awareness may affect different parts of the process differently: Political awareness is associated with increased exposure to current communications that might change one's opinion, but it is also associated with heightened capacity to react critically to new information. These two effects may be cross cutting, as in the case of congressional elections, where the most aware persons are most heavily exposed to the incumbent's campaign but also most resistant. But this needn't be the case. There are, as we shall see, cases in which the most aware persons are the easiest segment of the public to reach and persuade, and other cases in which very inattentive persons are most susceptible to persuasion. Systematically explaining these and other ways in which political awareness affects public opinion and voting behavior will be the most important single contribution of this book.

In view of the central importance of political awareness, it is worthwhile to digress briefly to consider how best to conceptualize and measure it. *Political awareness,* as used in this study, refers to the extent to which an individual pays attention to politics *and* understands what he or she has encountered. Attention alone is not enough, since people who, for example, watch the TV news while lying on the couch after dinner and a couple of glasses of wine will typically fail to enhance their political awareness.

The key to political awareness, then, is the absorption of political communications. Political awareness denotes intellectual or cognitive engagement with public affairs as against emotional or affective engagement or no engagement at all. Scholars have used a wide variety of concepts and measures to capture what is here being called political awareness. The concepts in the research literature include political expertise, cognitive complexity, political involvement, attentiveness, sophistication, and political acuity. Although choice of labels is perhaps mainly a matter of personal or disciplinary taste, my reason for preferring political awareness is that this term, better than the others, seems to capture the key processes in the model to be introduced here, namely an individual's reception and comprehension of communications from the political environment.

Scholars have also used several different types of questions to operationalize what I am calling political awareness. These include media exposure, political participation, education, and self-described interest in politics. As I argue in the Measurement Appendix, political awareness is, for both theoretical and empirical reasons, best measured by simple tests of neutral factual information about politics. The reason, in brief, is that tests of political information, more directly than any of the alternative measures, capture what has actually gotten into people's minds, which, in turn, is critical for intellectual engagement with politics. Typical information questions, as suggested earlier, ask which political

party controls the House of Representatives, or whether Mainland China is a member of the United Nations.

Thus the information tests used to assess political awareness in this book are strictly *neutral* or *factual*. This point is stressed because, as indicated earlier, much of the information carried in elite discourse is neither neutral nor strictly factual. A news report implying that the Pentagon is awash in scandal and mismanagement, or a presidential remark to the effect that most unemployed persons could get jobs if they tried hard enough, constitute factual information in that they may contain some simple facts, and that they convey sincerely held beliefs about factual states of affairs. Yet they are not neutral, since they have been framed for partisan purposes and can be reasonably disputed by fair-minded people. Some kinds of assertions, such as the claim that the spread of abortion signifies a degradation of American morals, are not even fully susceptible to empirical verification; yet the broadcast of this claim in the media would constitute a broadcast of information, since it would involve an assertion about the actual state of the nation.

Nonneutral and not necessarily factual information, thus, is indistinguishable from political argumentation. Neutral factual information, such as which party controls Congress, is important in this book insofar as it measures a person's likely level of exposure to this other, nonneutral and not exclusively factual information.

To avoid confusion between information of the neutral and nonneutral types, I will from this point onward use information exclusively in its *nonneutral* sense, as in "information about the deterioration of American morals." Instead of referring to tests of neutral factual information, as used in measuring political awareness, I will simply refer to tests of political awareness or political knowledge.

In order to remind the reader that information is normally used in its nonneutral sense, I will occasionally place the term in quotes. Also, for aesthetic reasons, I will sometimes substitute cognates of attentiveness for awareness, as in "politically inattentive" for "politically unaware."

POLITICAL PREDISPOSITIONS

Citizens differ greatly in their levels of exposure to elite discourse, but these exposure differences can, by themselves, explain only a part of the variance in individual opinions. For citizens are more than passive receivers of whatever media communications they encounter. They possess a variety of interests, values, and experiences that may greatly affect their willingness to accept – or alternatively, their resolve to resist – persuasive influences.

In this book, I refer to all of these factors as *political predispositions,* by which I mean stable, individual-level traits that regulate the acceptance or nonacceptance of the political communications the person receives. Because the totality of the communications that one accepts determines one's opinions (by

means that I will specify), predispositions are the critical intervening variable between the communications people encounter in the mass media, on one side, and their statements of political preferences, on the other.

The sources of variability in individuals' political predispositions are beyond the scope of this book. My assumption, however, is that predispositions are at least in part a distillation of a person's lifetime experiences, including childhood socialization and direct involvement with the raw ingredients of policy issues, such as earning a living, paying taxes, racial discrimination, and so forth. Predispositions also partly depend on social and economic location and, probably at least as strongly, on inherited or acquired personality factors and tastes.[10]

Since this book emphasizes the role of elite-supplied information in shaping mass opinions, I wish to stress that elites are *not* assumed to have an important role in shaping individuals' political predispositions. In my argument, predispositions mediate people's responses to elite information in the manner just indicated, but predispositions are not in the short run influenced by elites.

It is likely that, over the long run, the elite ideas that one internalizes have some effect on one's values and other predispositions. But however this may be, this book is a study of opinion formation and change in particular short-term situations, and for this purpose, the long-term influence of elites on predispositions, to the extent that it exists, may be safely neglected.[11]

Of the various different types of predispositions, political values will receive the most sustained attention in this book. This is because they seem to have a stronger and more pervasive effect on mass opinions than any of the other predispositional factors.[12] But some of the other factors, especially race and party attachment, are also very important and will receive significant attention.

Values refer to "general and enduring standards" that hold a "more central position than attitudes" in individuals' belief systems (Kinder and Sears, 1985: p. 674) and that "lead us to take particular positions on social issues" (Rokeach, 1973: p. 13). Thus, for example, a person strongly attached to the value of economic individualism would, all else equal, be more likely to reject an argument for higher taxes to pay for social welfare spending than would someone less attached to this value.

Political values, understood in this way, have recently become objects of serious scholarly study (for a review, see Kinder and Sears, 1985). Although this research has been quite useful in invigorating a previously moribund debate on the structure of mass opinions, it appears to have two important weaknesses.

10 Although the academic literature on personality and opinion is problematic, individual differences in political attitudes appear to reflect more than just differences in economic and social location, and it seems reasonable to describe these underlying differences in terms of personality. (See Adorno et al., 1950; Smith, Bruner, and White, 1956; McClosky, 1958; Altemeyer, 1981; Costantini and Craik, 1980; Wilson, 1983.)

11 Elite ideas, having been internalized, can have important effects on susceptibility to subsequent elite influence, but, as I show in my discussion of "inertial resistance" to persuasion in later chapters, they are able to do so without having any intervening effect on political values.

12 Except perhaps race. But there is too little variance in race – that is, the population is too one-sidedly white – to permit making race a central predispositional factor in this study.

One of these weaknesses will be centrally addressed in this book, but the second must be provisionally resolved by assumption.

The first limitation is that, like most public opinion research, the current literature on values largely fails to take systematic account of the vast differences in political awareness that exist among citizens. This failure is unfortunate because a frequent claim of the values literature has been that citizens who are, as most scholars agree, too unsophisticated to possess "ideologies" nonetheless possess sufficient awareness to make reliable use of "values" to structure their policy preferences. Thus, in a leading example of this research, Hurwitz and Peffley (1987) propose a hierarchical model of foreign policy opinions in which "core values" determine individuals' "general postures," which in turn determine opinions on particular foreign policy issues. The fact that many Americans are quite ignorant of foreign affairs is, according to Hurwitz and Peffley, precisely the reason that individuals must often fall back on core values and general postures to instruct their policy preferences:

> we see individuals as attempting to cope with an extraordinarily confusing world . . . by structuring views about specific foreign policies according to their more general and abstract beliefs. (p. 1114)

Although this point is an excellent one, citizens must still possess some minimal degree of information in order to recognize the relevance of their values for a given issue, and, as I have been arguing, it is quite easy to underestimate how often even minimal political information may be absent for some citizens.

By way of illustration, we may examine opinions toward the U.S. policy of aid to the Contra rebels in Nicaragua. Figure 2.4 shows how citizens who differed in both their political awareness and in their predisposition toward use of military force responded in 1987 to a question on this topic. The persons classified as "hawks" in the figure are ones who said, over a set of general questions, that they strongly value military strength, an aggressive posture toward potential adversaries, and uncompromising opposition to communism. "Doves" are persons who rejected these positions, preferring to emphasize negotiations and accommodation with communism. Political awareness in the figure is measured by simple tests of factual knowledge about politics. (Items used in scale construction may be found in the Measures Appendix.)

The left side of the figure shows that politically aware hawks and doves differ greatly on the question of whether U.S. "aid to the Contras in Nicaragua" should be increased, decreased, or kept the same: Forty-two percent of the most aware hawks, but only 3 percent of the most aware doves, favored increased Contra aid. However, among persons in the middle third of the awareness scale, hawks and doves differed only modestly, and among persons at the bottom of the scale, there were no value-based differences at all – a result that raises doubts whether the hawk–dove value dimension has any utility for understanding the views of poorly informed persons.

However, the right-hand side of Figure 2.4 supports the conventional view of the importance of values. It shows responses to a question about whether the

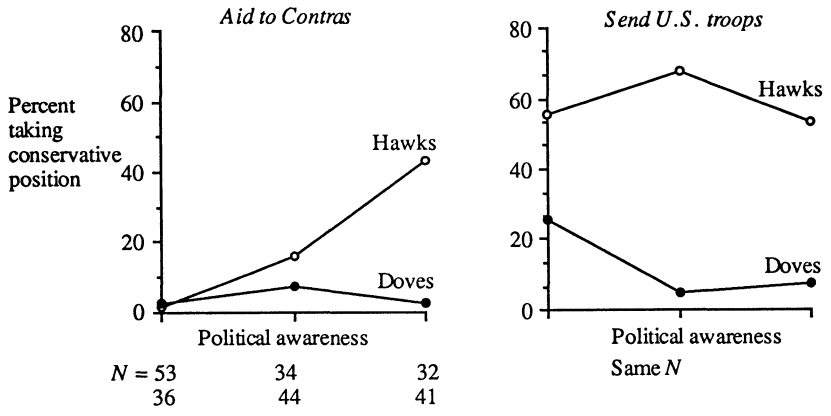


Figure 2.4. Two questions about Central America policy. *Source:* 1987 NES pilot survey.

United States should send troops "to stop the spread of communism" in Central America. Here we find sharp differences between hawks and doves at all levels of awareness.

Why the difference in response pattern to the two items, especially among less politically aware persons? The likely explanation is the contextual information carried in the two questions: The first, although scarcely lacking in clarity, requires respondents to know who the Contras are and what they stand for. This requirement will often go unmet among persons who are, in general, poorly informed about politics. (Commercial surveys taken in 1985 indicated that only about half of the American public knew which side the United States was supporting in the fighting in Nicaragua.) The second question in Figure 2.4, by mentioning communism, makes clear what the value implications of the issue are, thereby enabling people inclined toward hawkish foreign policies to recognize and support them.

Thus, the impact of people's value predispositions always depends on whether citizens possess the contextual information needed to translate their values into support for particular policies or candidates, and the possession of such information can, as shown earlier, never be taken for granted. This contingency in the relationship between values and support for particular policies or candidates underlies this entire study, whose purpose, as I have indicated, is to show

how individuals use information from the political environment to translate their values and other predispositions into more specific opinion statements.

A second shortcoming of the values literature arises from its failure, so far, to specify the nature of the theoretical relationship of different value continua to one another and to political ideology. The problem arises from the fact that, although there are numerous "value dimensions" between which there is no obvious logical connection, many people nonetheless respond to different value dimensions *as if* they were organized by a common left–right dimension. There is, in other words, a tendency for people to be fairly consistently "left" or "right" or "centrist" on such disparate value dimensions as economic individualism, opinions toward communists, tolerance of nonconformists, racial issues, sexual freedom, and religious authority. The correlations among these different value dimensions are never so strong as to suggest that there is one and only one basic value dimension, but they are always at least moderately strong, and among highly aware persons, the correlations are sometimes quite strong.[13] And, of course, there are also moderately strong correlations between people's self-descriptions as liberal or conservative and their scores on the various values measures.

What, then, is the nature of the relationship between "values," as examined in recent research, and "ideology," which an older generation of researchers took so seriously? In view of the empirical covariation among measures of the two concepts, the question seems an obvious and important one.

Let "values" be defined, as they normally are, as domain-specific organizing principles, such as economic individualism, where each value dimension lends structure to public opinions within a particular domain. "Ideology" may then be defined as a more general left–right scheme capable of organizing a wide range of fairly disparate concerns, where the concerns being organized include various value or issue dimensions or both.

These definitions closely link the two concepts without, as far as I can see, violating the conventional meaning of either term. There are, however, two significant novelties. First, the various value dimensions are no longer conceptually independent; rather, each is one among several correlated dimensions of a master concept, ideology. Second, ideology is no longer the strictly unidimensional concept that many discussions have considered it to be, but a constellation of related value dimensions.

The dimensionality of ideology may be analogous, in a certain respect, to the dimensionality of human intelligence. As a large psychological literature has shown and as common experience confirms, it is mistaken to say that there is a single dimension of intelligence. Thus, we all know people who are better at some kinds of tasks than others – mathematical reasoning rather than verbal expression, to take the most obvious case. Yet it is rare to find someone who is very high on one dimension and very low on another – a brilliant writer who

13 For evidence of the breadth of attitudes apparently organized by the left–right dimension, see Monroe, 1990; McClosky and Zaller, 1984: chap. 7.

cannot do simple addition and multiplication, or a great mathematician who cannot also generate fluent written prose. A person who is extraordinarily high on one dimension of intelligence tends to be at least fairly high on others. A similar thing appears to be true for ideology. It is unusual to encounter a person who is very liberal on one dimension of ideology and extremely conservative on another.[14] There is a tendency, which is clear but not overpowering, for people to stake out roughly comparable positions on a series of seemingly unrelated left–right value dimensions.

There are two practical implications of this view for the measurement of predispositions in this study. First, one should, whenever possible, use appropriate domain-specific measures of political values, rather than a general measure of ideology, as the operational measure of citizens' predispositions to accept or reject the political communications they receive. The reason is that ideology, as the more general measure of people's left–right tendencies, is more likely to miss reactions to a particular issue than is an indicator that has been tailored to that issue.

The second implication of this analysis is that, since values are, to a significant extent, organized by a person's general ideological orientation, one can, if necessary, use general or omnibus ideology measures to capture people's left–right tendencies. And often it is necessary. Much of this book focuses on cases of opinion change, but there are relatively few cases of mass opinion change that have been captured by high-quality, publicly available surveys. Hence I must make full use of what little good data on opinion change are available. In some of these datasets, there are excellent measures of political values that capture exactly the value dimensions that regulate the opinion change. But in other cases, a survey may have only a very general measure of value orientation, such as liberal–conservative self-identification, or measures of value orientations that are not particularly close to the opinion that is undergoing change. In cases of this kind, I develop the best measure of general left–right tendency that I can and go ahead, hoping that one such measure may be, in practice, almost as good as another. (The measures employed are always generally described in the text of the book and exactly described in the Measures Appendix.) The justification for this practice, beyond sheer necessity, is the notion that there is a general left–right organizing principle that runs through many different value dimensions.

This practice is obviously a conservative one. To the extent that general measures of value orientation fail to capture a predisposition that is related to the opinion undergoing change, I will tend to get weak or nonexistent relationships with values. And indeed, some of the relationships I have found appear weaker than I believe they would be if stronger value measures were available.

Finally, a note on terminology. At some points in this study I will describe individuals as "liberal" or "conservative." In so doing, I will *never* mean to

14 The obvious exceptions here are libertarians, who tend to be conservative on economic issues and liberal on life-style issues. But libertarians are sufficiently uncommon in the United States that studies of ideology routinely and apparently safely ignore them.

imply that the people so designated are necessarily full-fledged, doctrinaire ideologues of the left or right. I will mean only that the people tend to be closer to the left or right pole of some particular value dimension, or closer to one or the other pole of the constellation of associated liberal–conservative values. Thus, rather than say that a person is high on a measure of equalitarianism or high on a measure of hawkishness, I may say that the person is liberal or conservative. But whichever term I use, the important point to remember is that, for purposes of this book, values and ideology have exactly the same theoretical status: They are indicators of *predispositions* to accept or reject particular political communications.

WHAT IS AN OPINION?

John Mueller begins his study of *War, Presidents, and Public Opinion* (1973) with a series of caveats that ought to appear on the opening pages of every book on public opinion, but which rarely do. He writes:

> The interview situation is an odd social experience. The respondent, on his doorstep or in his living room, is barraged with a set of questions on a wide variety of subjects by a stranger, usually a rather well-educated woman over 30, who carefully notes each response on a sheet of paper. Few people are accustomed to having their every utterance faithfully recorded and many find the experience flattering. And, aware that their views are being preserved for the ages, they do not wish to appear unprepared at that moment. Under these circumstances it is not surprising to find respondents pontificating in a seemingly authoritative, if basically "truthful," manner on subjects about which they know nothing or to which they have never given any thought whatsoever. . . . (p. 1)

The consequences of asking uninformed people to state opinions on topics to which they have given little if any previous thought are quite predictable: Their opinion statements give every indication of being rough and superficial. The opinion statements vacillate randomly across repeated interviews of the same people (see Table 2.1; also see Converse, 1964; Achen, 1975; Dean and Moran, 1977; Erickson, 1979; Feldman, 1989; Zaller, 1990); entirely trivial changes in questionnaire construction, such as switching the order in which questions are asked or response options are listed, can easily produce 5 to 10 percentage point shifts in aggregate opinion, and occasionally double that (Schuman and Presser, 1981; Bishop, Oldendick, and Tuchfarber, 1984; Tourangeau et al., 1989); and different ways of phrasing questions regularly have large effects on measured levels of public support for an issue. For example, Rasinski (1989) reports that, over several surveys, 68 percent of Americans felt too little money was being spent on "halting the rising crime rate," but that only 55 percent felt too little was being spent on "law enforcement." Similarly, 68 percent felt that too little was being spent on "protecting social security," but only 53 percent felt this way about spending on "social security." Or, in another type of case, 45 percent of Americans would "not allow" a communist to give a speech, whereas only 20 percent of Americans would "forbid" the same behavior (Schuman and

Table 2.1. *Response stability in repeated interviews: Two examples*

Opinion on cooperation with Russia[a]	January 1980			
	Coop.	Mid.	Tough	DK
June 1980				
Cooperate	52%	25	13	19
Middle	14	24	17	16
Tougher	23	41	60	18
Don't know	11	11	10	47
	100%	100	100	100
N	266	153	238	74

Opinion on level of government services[b]	January 1980			
	Cut	Middle	Same	DK
June 1980				
Cut	54%	38	19	34
Middle	18	24	10	10
Keep same	11	25	59	15
Don't know	17	14	13	41
	100%	100	100	100
	362	122	208	138

[a] The question was: "Some people feel it is important for us to try very hard to get along with Russia. Others feel it is a big mistake to try too hard to get along with Russia . . ." People were asked to place themselves on a 7-point scale. Points 1, 2, and 3 have been counted as "cooperate"; 4 as middle; 5, 6, and 7 as "tougher."

[b] The question was: "Some people think the government should provide fewer services, even in areas such as health and education, in order to reduce spending. Other people feel it is important for the government to continue the services it now provides even if it means no reduction in spending . . ."

Source: 1980 NES panel survey.

Presser, 1981: p. 277). A record instance of the effects of changes in question wording may be a *New York Times* poll in 1983 which found that public support for a "freeze" on nuclear weapons production, at that moment a topic of heated interest, varied between 18 percent and 83 percent, depending on how the issue was framed.[15]

It is easy to think of reasons why few analysts of public opinion follow Mueller's example in exhibiting this catalogue of horrors in their opening pages. The most obvious is that they fear being dismissed out of hand, losing their audience before any argument has been made, if they too candidly reveal the dubious nature of the data on which their study depends.

But a more important reason, I believe, is that no one knows quite what to make of the multiple vagaries of mass opinion. Most analysts truly believe that public opinion is a more substantial entity than is indicated by the evidence just cited – and yet the gloomy indications are all too real. Being unable to square all the facts with what one believes is true, one simply puts aside the troubling evidence for the time being, leaving it to survey methodologists to work out, and writes about those aspects of public opinion one does understand.

An obvious problem with this approach is that it conceals information from the reader. Another is that it relinquishes the opportunity of making realistic statements about how mass opinion, in all of its elusiveness, forms and changes.

15 Judith Miller, 30 May 1982, p. A1.

In view of these considerations, the present study will make no effort to hide or underplay the types of problems with opinion data that have just been described. Indeed, it will make a theory of why the problems exist an integral part of its analysis. The theory is more simplistic than I would like, but it will at least address the problems head on.

This approach is a gamble. Placing at the center of the book a theory of the nature of public opinion – a subject that neither I nor anyone else fully understands – ties its entire argument to some weak reeds, giving critics an opportunity to complain, correctly, that its foundations are uncertain. Whether the returns on this risky strategy, the opportunity to sketch a unified and realistic treatment of the dynamics of public opinion, have been worth their cost will be up to the reader to decide.

Let me begin this part of my argument by recounting in more detail the vagaries of mass political opinion to which I have alluded; the relatively narrow-gauge theories by which scholars have sought to explain some of these phenomena; and the more general theory that I will use to explain these findings and to integrate them into a model of the effect of elite discourse on mass opinions.

Problems with mass opinion reports: Over time instability

Table 2.1 gives two typical examples of response instability over time. The first question, from a sample of respondents who were interviewed in January and again in June of 1980, asks whether the United States should try harder to cooperate with the Soviet Union, our Cold War adversary, or whether we should get tougher. As can be seen, 60 percent of those who favored a tougher stand in January still took this position in June; the rest were scattered across the other three options (greater cooperation with Russia, a middle position, or "no opinion"). Of those who took a neutral middle position in January, only 24 percent still did so in June, with most of the rest now favoring either more cooperation or less. Altogether, only 50 percent of the respondents took the same position in June that they had taken in January. (If everyone were simply guessing each time he were asked the question, roughly 32 percent would be expected by chance alone to state the same opinion on successive interviews, given my recoding of the item.) The same tendencies are apparent in the second question, which concerns the proper level of government services. Here, some 55 percent of the survey respondents managed to state the same opinion on successive interviews.

One obvious interpretation of these flip-flops is that many people undergo genuine opinion change between interviews. The evidence, however, fails to support this interpretation. When the same respondents are asked the same question on three different occasions, one can typically predict their opinion on the third interview as well from the first interview as the second. If changes between the first and second interviews represented systematic opinion change, this would not be possible. The generally accepted conclusion, therefore, has

been that response instability of the type shown in Table 2.1 predominantly represents some sort of chance variation. But what sort of chance variation, and why so much of it?

In his famous paper on "The nature of belief systems in mass publics," Converse (1964) argued that opinion instability is due mainly to individuals who lack strong feelings on the given issue but nevertheless indulge interviewers by politely choosing as best they can between the response options put in front of them – but often choosing in an essentially random fashion. "[L]arge portions of an electorate," he suggested, "simply do not have meaningful beliefs, even on issues that have formed the basis for intense political controversy among elites for substantial periods of time" (1964: p. 245).

This conclusion has been strongly challenged by scholars who contend that, although people's "survey responses" fluctuate greatly, citizens have underlying "true attitudes" that are overwhelmingly stable (Achen, 1975, 1983; Dean and Moran, 1977; Erikson, 1979; Judd and Milburn, 1980; Judd, Milburn, and Krosnick, 1981; Feldman, 1989; Zaller, 1990; an exception is Krosnick, 1988; for general reviews, see Kinder and Sears, 1985 and Smith, 1984). The fluctuations that appear in people's overt opinion statements are attributed to "measurement error," where such error is said to stem from the inherent difficulty of mapping one's preexisting opinions onto the unavoidably vague language of survey questions.

The theory of measurement error has an especially attractive implication. If one believes that attitudinal variables have been measured with large amounts of random error, it follows that their correlations with other variables will be artificially deflated. And if this is so, it is legitimate to reinflate these depressed correlations by means of standard psychometric techniques, which researchers routinely do. Thus, attitudinal variables which, in fact, exhibit high instability over time and low correlations with other variables are made, by means of correction procedures, to appear almost perfectly stable and highly correlated with other variables. In this way, the problem of response instability is rendered not only innocuous but invisible.

Both the Converse and measurement error approaches to response instability appear to have deficiencies. Converse's thesis, which takes any instability as evidence of a "nonattitude," was an extreme claim intended to characterize opinions only on certain highly abstract issues. On more typical issues, as Converse and Markus (1979) argue, people's opinions may be more or less "crystallized" and are, as a result of this, more or less stable. But this only raises the question of what exactly crystallization consists of. Since no one has ever said, opinion crystallization remains more a metaphor than a testable theory of opinion stability (Krosnick and Schuman, 1988).

The newer "measurement error" theory of response instability seems equally underspecified at its theoretical core. When, as all estimates agree, *measurement "error" normally constitutes one-half to three-quarters of the variance*

of opinion items, one naturally wonders what this chance "error" consists of and how it has been generated. Yet researchers have been remarkably uncurious about this problem. In a large majority of cases in which it is acknowledged, analysts make a statistical correction for it and move quickly on to whatever their study is mainly about. As a result, "measurement error" is closer to being a euphemism for "unexplained variance" than it is to being a well-understood phenomenon (see, however, Schuman and Presser, 1981; Krosnick and Berent, 1992).

Problems with mass opinion reports: "Response effects"

A second embarrassment to the conventional view of opinions has been the discovery of substantial amounts of nonrandom or "systematic error" in people's opinion reports. Many respondents react to the context in which a question is asked, to the order in which alternative responses are presented, and to wholly nonsubstantive and trivial alterations in questions. The systematic effects of such seemingly irrelevant features of the interview process are known as "response effects."

Consider a well-known experiment during the 1970s on Americans' opinions toward Soviet journalists. In a split-half sample, 37 percent of respondents were willing to allow Communist reporters in the United States. Yet when, in the other half-sample, respondents were first asked whether U.S. reporters should be allowed in Russia (which most favored), the percentage agreeing to allow Russian reporters into the United States nearly doubled to 73 percent. The explanation for this huge difference, as Schuman and Presser (1981) suggest, is that when people are asked the Communist reporters item alone, they respond on the basis of anti-Communist opinions. When, however, the question is preceded by one about American reporters working in Russia,

> a norm of reciprocity is immediately made salient and a substantial number of respondents feel bound to provide an answer that is consistent with their previous response. . . . The crux of the matter seems to be that the reporter questions have two meanings, one involving an attitude toward an object and another involving an attitude toward a norm. (p. 28)

Note that this explanation implicitly abandons the notion that individuals possess a single, fixed opinion toward the rights of Communist reporters. Rather, individuals are assumed to have at least two considerations, one involving Communists and the other involving the norm of fair play, and to answer the question according to whichever consideration has been made salient by the questionnaire.

There are numerous other findings of this type: People are less likely to describe themselves as interested in politics just after they have been asked about obscure issues (Bishop et al., 1984); people's opinions toward abortion are affected by the kinds of items (concerning, for example, religion or women's rights) that precede it (Tourangeau and Rasinski, 1988; Tourangeau et al. 1989);

people give quite different answers to open-ended questions than to questions that ask them to choose among a series of prespecified options (Schuman and Scott, 1987).

Question-wording effects

It is uncommon for a change in question order to shift public opinion by more than 10 or 15 percentage points, and many shift opinion by smaller amounts or not at all. Changes in the substantive wording of questions can, on the other hand, produce much larger effects on political opinions and can do so much more reliably. Yet these changes are not normally considered either worrisome or even especially interesting. The feeling seems to be that differently worded questions *should* get different answers, since they change either the emotional loading of the issue or, in some cases, what the respondent is being asked about.

It is not clear, however, that this complaisance is warranted. It is, for example, well established that adding the endorsement of a prominent politician to a policy question – as in, "Do you favor or oppose President X's policy of . . . ?" – is likely to change the public's response to that issue, depending on the popular view of President X. But if, as conventional opinion models assume, citizens have preexisting "true attitudes" that they merely reveal to the inquiring pollster, such "endorsement effects" should not occur. The fact that they do occur, and quite reliably, indicates that many respondents are making up their opinions – or at least editing and modifying them – as they go through the questionnaire.

Consider another type of question wording effect. In his study of support for the Korean War, Mueller (1973) found that people were more likely to express support for the war if the antiwar option required them to confess that their country had made a mistake by entering the war. Similarly, support for the war was consistently 15 to 20 percentage points greater if the war was described as necessary to stop communism. When both factors were at work, their joint impact on opinion was considerable. Thus, in one poll taken in the fall of 1953, only about 38 percent of the public said that "the Korean War has been worth fighting"; but in another poll taken at about the same time, 64 percent said that the United States "did the right thing in sending troops to stop the Communist invasion" (Mueller: table 3.1). As Mueller remarked,

> These data suggest somewhat conflicting observations. On the one hand, support for the war was clearly tied to the anti-Communist spirit in America at the time. To generate a kind of war fever, one merely had to toss the words, "Communist invasion," into the discussion. On the other hand, the Communist element was not entirely built into the response to the war because Americans had to be reminded of it before their anti-Communism was fully activated. . . . (Mueller 1973, pp. 46–8)

So, we again find out that a sizable fraction of survey respondents appear to form their opinions during the interview on the basis of the ideas made salient to them by the question, rather than simply revealing preexisting "true attitudes."

The counterargument to this conclusion – that different questions were involved and should therefore be expected to produce different answers even if people did have preexisting opinions – does not seem to me credible. The issue that people were addressing – the appropriateness of the U.S. response to an invasion of South Korea by the Communist government of North Korea – was the same whether or not the survey question used the critical phrase, "Communist invasion." Thus, anyone who had a fixed opinion on the war should have been able to express it whether communism was mentioned or not.

A clear demonstration that changes in question wording can change people's responses *even when the underlying issue remains exactly the same* may be found in Tversky and Kahneman's (1982) case of the rare Asian disease. These two psychologists put the following questions to a sample of college students:

> Imagine the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimates of the consequences of the programs are as follows:
>
> If program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved.
>
> If program B is adopted, there is a one-third probability that 600 people will be saved, and a two-thirds probability that no people will be saved.
>
> Which of these two programs do you favor?

This problem requires respondents to choose between a certain fixed loss and a gamble having an identical expected loss. In this case, 72 percent chose the certain loss, that is, saving 200 persons via program A. Yet when a comparable sample was asked in a differently worded question to respond to precisely the same dilemma, the results were radically different. In the second sample, the alternatives were described as follows:

> If program C is adopted, 400 people will die.
>
> If program D is adopted, there is a one-third probability that nobody will die, and a two-thirds probability that 600 people will die.

In this situation, only 22 percent chose the certain loss of 400 lives – a reduction of 50 percentage points. The conclusion to be drawn from this example, as from earlier ones, is that differences in the wording of questions can determine how people think about and hence respond to issues even when, as here, the denotative meanings of the competing wordings are exactly the same.

The need for a model of the survey response

There are, to reiterate, two types of evidence that weigh against the conventional notion that individuals have preexisting attitudes that they simply reveal in response to survey questions. The first is the widely replicated finding that 50 to 75 percent of the variance in typical opinion items is *random* "error" – an amount that is too large to be comfortably ascribed to the effects of vaguely worded questions. The second is the evidence of large amounts of *systematic* "error" arising from the effects of question order and question wording.

These findings are more than methodological curiosities. They seriously undermine the conventional view that surveys are passive measures of "what the public really believes." More ominously, they raise the fear that a large fraction of what opinion researchers measure is either random or systematic "noise."

In the last fifteen years, survey methodologists and social psychologists have recognized this problem and sought to deal with it. They have tended to abandon the conventional notion that people possess fixed opinions that they simply *reveal* in surveys, and have begun to concentrate instead on the "question-answering process" by which individuals *construct* opinion reports in response to the particular stimulus that confronts them.

In a recent example of this research, Wilson and Hodges (1991) describe the traditional view of attitudes as being essentially a "file drawer" model of attitudes:

> When people are asked how they feel about something, such as legalized abortion, their Uncle Harry, or anchovies on a pizza, presumably they consult a mental file containing their evaluation. They look for the file marked "abortion," or "Uncle Harry," or "anchovies," and report the evaluation it contains.

But Wilson and Hodges (1991) reject the general validity of this model. "People often construct their attitudes, rather than simply reporting the contents of a mental file." Their attitude reports are based on the ideas in a large but internally conflicted "database," so that the "attitude" that is reported at a given time is a "temporary construction" which depends on peculiarities of the process by which a person has constructed it.

Wilson and Hodges are not the only researchers to entertain such radical notions. In a prominent 1988 paper, Tourangeau and Rasinski also abandoned the traditional view of political attitudes and proposed to replace it with a general model of the "question-answering" process by which people construct attitude statements. (I will deal further with their model later on.) Similar though more modest steps have been taken by Schuman and Presser (1981), Bishop et al. (1984), Iyengar and Kinder (1987), Bartels (1988), Kinder and Sanders (1990), and Popkin (1991).

Unfortunately, most research on the new "question-answering models" has tended to focus on response effects, and has had nothing to say about either random response instability or the larger process by which people form their opinions in response to information gleaned from the political environment. What is therefore needed is a broader question-answering model.

This is what I attempt to provide in this book. Like a fair number of survey methodologists and psychologists, I abandon the conventional but implausible view that citizens typically possess "true attitudes" on every issue about which a pollster may happen to inquire, and instead propose a model of how individuals construct opinion reports in response to the particular stimuli that confront them. This model unites in one theory an account of how people acquire information about politics, as sketched in the first part of this chapter, with an account of how they use that information to formulate responses to typical survey

items. The model is consistent with – indeed, it seeks to provide explanations for – the vagaries of the mass survey response, as outlined in these pages.

The argument, first made in a 1984 convention paper (Zaller, 1984b), is roughly as follows: People are continuously exposed to a stream of political news and information, much of it valenced so as to push public opinion in one direction or the other. But, owing to the generally low levels of attention to politics in this country, most people on most issues are relatively uncritical about the ideas they internalize. In consequence, they fill up their minds with large stores of only partially consistent ideas, arguments, and considerations. When asked a survey question, they call to mind as many of these ideas as are immediately accessible in memory and use them to make choices among the options offered to them. But they make these choices in great haste – typically on the basis of the one or perhaps two considerations that happen to be at the "top of the head"[16] at the moment of response.

The basic claim of the model, thus, is that survey responses are a function of immediately accessible "considerations," where the flow of information in elite discourse determines which considerations are salient. The reason for response instability, on this view, is that different considerations happen to be salient at different times, which causes people's survey responses to differ over repeated interviews. Changes in question order or question wording can bring about systematic changes in the considerations immediately salient to people, and hence systematic changes in their survey responses.

By way of illustrating the operation of the model, consider how typical citizens might have responded to a question about the proper level of U.S. defense spending during the cold war. Most would have heard a fair amount about the issue without ever having had the occasion to answer a survey question about it. They might have been upset about reports of Pentagon waste and mismanagement, but they might also have worried about the Soviet threat and America's capacity to contain it – all without thinking about or even recognizing the tradeoffs between these competing concerns. When unexpectedly asked on a survey for their opinion on defense spending, they must have, in just a second or two, somehow pulled these and other thoughts together into a "survey response" on defense spending. In doing so, they did not fully canvass their minds for all relevant thoughts. Rather, if they had happened the night before to see a news program on a major defense procurement scandal, they might answer the question on the basis of that consideration. But if, on the other hand, they had been reminded by an earlier question about the threat of Soviet aggression they might instead answer that defense spending should remain high. And if, in a follow-up survey sometime later, the survey questions were asked in a different order, or if they had seen a different TV program the night before, they might have had different ideas at the tops of their heads and hence made different survey responses.

16 This useful description, which will recur many times in this book, is owed to Taylor and Fiske (1978).

An important feature of the model is that people who are more politically aware are more selective about the "information" that they internalize – which is to say, they will be more likely to reject ideas that are inconsistent with their values. As a result of this selectivity, the ideas they internalize are more internally consistent and more consistent with their values. Responses to closed-ended survey questions reflect this by exhibiting greater over time stability and greater ideological consistency with one another.

Background of the question-answering model

Although the suggestion of a question-answering approach to understanding mass opinions is still novel within the public opinion field, it is approaching the status of orthodoxy in some psychological circles. It is instructive to review some of the research on which this emerging orthodoxy rests.

One strand of this research, conducted by mathematical psychologists and focusing on problem solving, regards the mind as a sort of bin filled with multiple interpretive constructs. Confronted with a set of "stimulus elements" (raw sensory impressions) in a problem, individuals stochastically search their minds for constructs that enable them to make sense of the stimuli (Atkinson, Bower, and Crothers, 1965). An interpretive construct, once chosen, determines one's understanding of the stimuli and hence one's response to it. A person's judgments, thus, depend quite directly on the ideas that happen to come to the top of the mind at critical points in the problem-solving exercise.

Another research tradition, common among social psychologists and mainly concerned with social cognition, focuses on the organization of ideas in the mind. A central concept in this research is "schema," a term that has been adapted from cognitive psychology. A schema is a cognitive structure that organizes prior information and experience around a central value or idea, and guides the interpretation of new information and experience.

A critical point about schemata is that people typically have several of them available for understanding any given phenomenon. For example, an individual being introduced to a "forty-year-old professor" would react quite differently if the same person were instead introduced as "a forty-year-old mother of three." That is, different associations would come to mind, different qualities of the person would be noticed, different conclusions would be drawn from the person's mannerisms, and so forth. In short, the perceiver's "attitude" toward the person would be different. Thus Tesser (1978), in statements that nicely capture a central feature of the model being suggested, writes:

> An attitude at a particular point in time is the result of a constructive process. . . . And, *there is not a single attitude toward an object* but, rather, any number of attitudes depending on the number of schemas available for thinking about the objects.
>
> [P]ersons do not have a *single* feeling or evaluation of an object. Feelings vary depending upon the particular cognitive schema we "tune in." (pp. 297–8, 307, emphasis in the original)

The key idea in these studies is that individuals do not typically possess "just one opinion" toward issues, but multiple potential opinions. The logical next question is then how, in the face of this, people manage to come to decisions at all.

This turns out to be an immensely complicated issue, involving the encoding of incoming information, perception or interpretations of information, efficiency of memory search, and degree of motivation, among other things. Thus, psychologists attempting to come to grips with these various issues have proposed models that are fearfully complicated (e.g., Wyer and Srull, 1989).

One point that does, however, appear reasonably clear is that, in the course of making decisions, including those involving political matters, individuals rarely take the time to canvass their minds for all relevant thoughts. Life is too short and the human mind too fallible. Rather, they appear to make decisions "off the top of the head" on the basis of whatever ideas are immediately accessible in memory. Thus, as Taylor and Fiske (1978) note, numerous studies have shown that the introduction or emphasis of a single piece of information – such as the fact that a particular person is a woman or a lawyer – can greatly affect subsequent expressions of opinion. Reviewing a variety of such evidence, Taylor and Fiske maintain, in an argument quite novel for its time, that many people make social judgments by seizing on

> a single, sufficient and salient explanation . . . often the first satisfactory one that comes along. . . . [I]nstead of employing base rate or consensus information logically, people are more often influenced by a single, colorful piece of case history evidence. . . . Instead of reviewing all the evidence that bears upon a particular problem, people frequently use the information which is most salient or available to them, that is, that which is most easily brought to mind. (p. 251)

On the basis of a much larger volume of evidence, Wyer and Srull (1989) maintain that people are

> unlikely to conduct an exhaustive search of memory for all of the knowledge they have accumulated that is relevant to a particular decision. Rather they retrieve and use only a small subset of this knowledge, apparently assuming that its implications are representative of all the knowledge they have acquired. (p. 81)

Yet, at the same time, much data in political science (Kelley, 1983), political psychology (Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989), and cognitive psychology (Anderson, 1974) make it clear that individuals may often utilize many diverse pieces of information in their decision making. For example, Kelley (1983) shows that voters decide between presidential candidates as if they were summing up numerous "likes" and "dislikes" about each party and candidate and choosing the one with the highest net total. Anderson's information-averaging models, which have achieved wide recognition in psychology, likewise show that individuals make use of a wide set of relevant cognitions in formulating opinion statements.

The model I propose tries to accommodate both top-of-the-head decision making, as suggested by Taylor and Fiske, and averaging across potentially large

amounts of disparate information, as suggested by Kelley and by Anderson. It does so by assuming that individuals make decisions by averaging over a nonrandom but stochastic sample of relevant considerations, where the size of the sample of considerations may vary between 1 and large. The size and composition of this sample depend on a variety of contextual and individual motivational factors, such as what ideas have been made salient by the questionnaire and how much attention a person generally pays to the subject at hand.

SUMMARY

This study focuses on interactions among three broad classes of variables: Aggregate-level variation in the information carried in elite discourse, including elite cues about how new information should be evaluated, individual-level differences in attention to this discourse, and individual-level differences in political values. Interactions among these variables determine the mix of "considerations" that gets into people's heads. Which of these considerations is available at the top of the head at the moment of confronting survey questions determines responses to the questions. A model based on these ideas is presented in the next chapter.