RUSSELL J. DALTON

CITIZEN POLITICS

Public Opinion and Political Parties in Advanced Industrial Democracies

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Seventh Edition

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PREFACE

Some scholars claim that history follows a circle, and if you wait long enough you will end up where you started. When I wrote the first edition of this book in the 1980s, many political scientists were openly worried about the viability of modern democracy. Claims about an imminent crisis of democracy were commonplace. Against this backdrop, the first edition of *Citizen Politics* (1988) argued that democracy was alive and well in the affluent established democracies, whose citizens believed in the democratic creed and wanted their governments to meet these expectations. That book showed that people were becoming more active in the political process, more likely to participate in elite-challenging activities, more likely to vote on issues and other policy criteria, and more demanding of their representatives. If democracy was in crisis, it was one of institutions, not of the democratic spirit among citizens.

Then current events changed. The toppling of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of communism in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, and the spread of democracy in the 1990s created a democratic euphoria. Even those who had proclaimed its limits a few years earlier now trumpeted this new wave of democratization. Suddenly it seemed apparent to everyone that democracy represented the start of a new history.

Now we have come full circle. The current conventional wisdom again claims that democracy is at risk—and the citizens are at fault. A host of distinguished scholars cite an apparently unending list of what is wrong with democracy's citizens. Too few of us follow politics, too few are voting, too many of us are cynical about politics, and too often we are intolerant to those who do not share our positions. It's déjà vu all over again, as Yogi Berra used to say.

Watching this ebb and flow of the political debate has deepened my belief that systematic research provides a corrective to the winds of punditry. Things were not so bad during the pessimistic days of the "crisis of democracy" literature, and they were not so good during the euphoria following the Berlin Wall's collapse. We understand the nature of democracy and its citizens not by watching talking heads on television or looking for evidence to confirm our personal views, but by talking to the public and learning how they think about politics and how they act on their beliefs. And while I sometimes subscribe to the line about "lies, damn lies, and statistics," in the long run systematic research can provide a deeper understanding of the true nature of citizen politics.

This book introduces the reader to what we know about citizens' political behavior, the questions that remain unanswered, and the implications of findings. The analyses focus on citizen politics in the United States, Great Britain, France,

and Germany, with frequent comparisons to other affluent democracies. This seventh edition engages in the debate on the vitality of contemporary democracy and argues that ongoing processes of social modernization are changing the values and behavior of the public. At the same time, social modernization has generated a conservative policy backlash across the democratic world, often concentrated on those left behind by the modernization process (versus those who benefitted from social change). The rise of far-right parties in Europe, Trump populism in the United States, and antielite rhetoric are signs of this discontent. In the end, however, if democracies successfully respond to these challenges, the democratic process will be stronger.

I hope this book is of value to several audiences. It was written primarily for classroom use in courses on comparative political parties, public opinion, and European politics. The first half (chapters 1–6) introduces the principles of public opinion and the broad contours of citizen action and citizen beliefs. The second half (chapters 7–11) covers party alignments and can be combined with other texts on political parties. The book concludes with a discussion of citizen attitudes toward democratic institutions and the political process and the choices that face the various polities.

At the graduate level, the book is a useful core text for courses on comparative political behavior or Western European politics. It summarizes the existing knowledge in the field and introduces the controversies that at present divide researchers. I hope instructors find that this introductory analysis facilitates discussion of readings from primary research materials. Even senior scholars may find familiar data interpreted in new and thought-provoking ways.

MAJOR REVISIONS

The basic framework and the findings of this book have remained fairly constant since the first edition. As more evidence has become available, the trends have become clearer and more apparent. This new edition includes several significant changes to improve the presentation.

- A new examination of how cultural issues, populism, and far right parties are reshaping voters' and parties' political positions.

- Discussion of whether the 2008 Great Recession has reversed the patterns of social modernization, political participation, and value change.

- A greatly restructured chapter on the nature of belief systems that integrates research insights from cognitive psychology.

- More attention to current academic debates over the decline of participation, the erosion of political support, and the implications for democracy. Hint: the sky is not falling.

- Description of new forms of political activity, such as Internet-based activism and new forms of political consumerism.

- Revision of all the chapters to present the latest research and empirical evidence, including new evidence from the 2016 U.S. elections, the 2017 British election, the 2017 German election, and the 2017 French election.

- A revised statistical primer (appendix A) to give readers guidance in interpreting tables and figures. In addition, it serves as a reference guide for using correlation statistics to understand the relationship between two traits, such as summarizing educational differences in voting turnout.

- A new data supplement described in appendix C based on the 2014 International Social Survey. These data are used throughout the book, and a free subset of survey questions is available for class use. The appendix which lists the variables along with the Statistical Package in the Social Sciences (SPSS) files are available from this website: https://edge.sagepub.com/dalton7e. Computer-based research projects on public opinion can enrich a course for students and provide a firsthand opportunity to understand the process of public opinion research.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about you, me, and the people around us—as citizens, voters, protesters, campaign workers, community activists, party members, and political spectators, we are the driving force of the democratic process. The spectacle of an American party convention, the intensity of a French farmers' protest, the community spirit of a New England town meeting, or the dedication of a German environmental group create an impressive image of democracy at work.

Yet, there is now an active debate on the vitality of contemporary democracy. During the past three decades, we watched in awe as the force of "people power" tore down the Berlin Wall, led to freedom in South Africa, and created a democratization wave on a global scale. Long-term social modernization in the West and globally has dramatically improved the income and living standards of the average person. Trends across the established democracies show that crime rates are down, life expectancy has increased, most people have more leisure time, women and minorities have more rights, and average incomes are higher (Pinker 2018). Social modernization also improves citizens' political skills and support for democratic politics (Welzel 2013). Political interest and overall participation rates have grown across the democratic world (Dalton 2017a; Vráblíková 2017). In many ways, it seems that democracy is working better now than in the past.

At the same time, however, new political challenges confront the established democracies. The rise of populist parties in Europe and the increasing fragmentation of these party systems create political strains in these nations. The surprising results of the Brexit vote in the United Kingdom, the Trump victory in the United States, and the almost instantaneous reinvention of the French party system are signs of major changes from the democratic politics of the past. New economic and cultural issues are creating new forms of political division: rising inequality, racial tensions, gender conflicts, gay rights, and other issues. These developments are apparent across the established democracies. I engage these new issues in this edition.

The claims of democratic malaise go deeper, however. Some of the leading political scientists warn that democracy is at risk. Various experts claim that social and civic engagement is weakening (Putnam 2000). Other evidence shows

that contemporary publics are becoming skeptical about politicians, parties, and democratic political institutions. Or they claim that we are not good democratic citizens (Sunstein 2018; Achen and Bartels 2017; Brennan 2016; Caplan 2007). Contemporary democracies are supposedly facing a malaise of the spirit that arises from their own citizens and that erodes the very foundations of the democratic process. There are common criticisms of institutions and structures of democracies and their inability to match their democratic ideals (Mounk 2017; Wolfe 2006). Each week my news posts on Facebook include dire warnings about democracy's future, with different dire warnings the following week. I'm waiting.

How can this be the best of times, and the worst of times, at the same time? The previous six editions of this book discussed this ebb and flow in scholars' evaluations of the democratic process and its citizens. Indeed, this is a long-standing debate, because each generation seemingly argues about the vitality of democracy. Both of the contrasting perspectives are real. Democracy is a dynamic system, and it changes to succeed and advance. This dynamism causes tensions and strains, but if successful it deepens and enriches the democratic process. The contemporary debate about democracy arises from the tremendous social changes that the established democracies have experienced in the past several decades. The political world is changing. Our puzzle is to understand how and why, and the implications of these changes.

This book focuses on the citizen's role in the democratic process, how this role has changed over time, and how these changes are altering the nature of democracy. The story is incomplete because we do not study the role of elites, interest groups, and other political actors. We also do not presume that the public is all-knowing or all-powerful. Indeed, there are many examples of the public's ignorance or error on policy issues (as there are examples of elite errors). The democratic process, like all human activities, is imperfect—but its strength lies in the premise that people are the best judges of their own destiny. The success of democracy is largely measured by the public's participation in the process, the respect for citizen rights, and the responsiveness of the system to popular demands. As Adlai Stevenson once said, in a democracy the people get the kind of government they deserve (for better or worse).

I also must acknowledge the complexity of studying the citizen's role in democracy. It is difficult to make simple generalizations about public opinion because the public isn't homogeneous. There isn't a single public. The public in any nation

consists of millions of individuals, each with his or her own view of the world and of their role in politics. Some people are liberal, some moderate, some conservative; others are socialist, reactionary, communist, or none of the above. Opinions on contemporary political issues are often divided—this is why the issues are controversial and require a political decision. Some people favor strict environmental laws; some see environmental standards as excessive. Some favor international trade; some are skeptical of its claimed benefits. The study of public opinion illustrates the diversity of the public.

In short, as social scientists, we deal with the most complex problem in nature: to understand and predict human behavior. Yet this isn't a hopeless task. Scientific public opinion surveys provide valuable tools for researchers. From a sample of a few thousand precisely selected individuals, we can make reliable statements about the distribution of attitudes and opinions (Asher 2016). An opinion survey allows the researcher to assess behavior as well as to study the motivations and expectations guiding behavior. Furthermore, we can divide a survey into subgroups to examine the diversity in individual opinions.

This book relies heavily on public opinion surveys. I do not claim that all we know about the public is found in the statistics and percentages of public opinion surveys. Some of the most insightful writings about people are qualitative studies of the topic. And yet, even insightful political analysts may make contradictory claims about the public. The value of the empirical method is that it provides a specific standard for evaluating different descriptions of public opinion or actions. Thus survey research is a tremendously valuable research tool for social scientists.

Drawing on an extensive collection of opinion surveys, this book examines public opinion in several advanced industrial democracies.[1] I describe how people view politics, how they participate in the process, what opinions they hold, how they choose their leaders through elections, and their images of government. These findings should help us to understand the public's role in the political process in contemporary democracies.

COMPARING PUBLIC OPINION ACROSS NATIONS

If you have ever traveled to a foreign country, you have already learned the first lesson of this book. Humans have many values and beliefs in common, but there are often differences in our values and behaviors. For example, the British stand in lines; the Germans don't. The Americans love hamburgers; the French don't. We realize what is distinctive to a nation only by making these comparisons.

There are several advantages to the comparative study of public opinion across the established democracies. Although these nations differ in their governments and party systems, they share broad similarities in the functioning of the democratic process and the citizen's role in the process. A comparative approach is a way to identify those aspects of political behavior that apply across nations. General theories of why people participate in democratic politics should apply to people

regardless of their nationality. Theories to explain party preferences should hold for Americans and Europeans if they represent basic features of human nature.

In most instances, we expect to find similar patterns of behavior in different democracies. If our theories do not work similarly across nations, then we have learned something new and important. Science often progresses by finding exceptions to the general theory, which necessitate further theoretical work. The same applies to social science.

Comparative analysis can also examine the effects of political structures on citizens' political behavior. For example, does the nature of a nation's electoral system affect people's voting choices? Or, does the structure of political institutions affect the patterns of political participation? Each nation represents a "natural experiment" wherein general theories can be tested in a different political context.

Finally, even if we are interested only in a single nation, comparative research is still very valuable. An old Hebrew riddle expresses this idea: "*Question:* Who first discovered water? *Answer:* I don't know, but it wasn't a fish." Immersing oneself in a single environment makes it harder to recognize the characteristics of that environment. It is difficult to understand what is unique and distinctive about American politics, for example, by studying only American politics. Indeed, many students of American politics may be surprised to learn that the United States is often the atypical case in cross-national comparisons. American public opinion and political processes are unique in many ways, but we perceive this only by rising above the waters.

CHOOSING NATIONS TO COMPARE

To balance our needs for comparison and attention to national differences, this book focuses on four nations: the United States, Great Britain, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), and France.[2] I chose these nations for several reasons. By many standards, these are the major powers among the Western democracies. Their population, size, economy, military strength, and political influence earn them leadership positions in international circles. The actions of any of these nations can have significant consequences for all the others.

These nations also highlight the major differences in the structure of democratic politics (see table 1.1). For example, Great Britain has a pure parliamentary system of government. The popularly elected House of Commons selects the prime minister to head the executive branch. This produces a fusion of legislative and executive power, because the same party and the same group of elites direct both branches of government. In contrast, the American government has a presidential system, with extensive checks and balances to maintain a separation of legislative and executive power. French politics has a modified presidential system. The public directly elects both the president and the National Assembly, which selects the premier to head the administration of government. Germany has a parliamentary system, with the popularly elected Bundestag selecting the chancellor as head of the executive branch. However, Germany also has a strong federal structure and

Table 1.1 Comparing Political Systems

National Characteristic	United States	Great Britain	Germany	France
Population (in millions)	326.6	64.8	80.6	67.1
Gross domestic product/capita	$59,500	$43,600	$50,200	$43,600
Political regime established	1789	Seventeenth century	1949	1958
State form	Republic	Constitutional monarchy	Republic	Republic
Government structure	Presidential	Parliamentary	Modified parliamentary	Modified presidential
Chief executive	President	Prime minister	Chancellor	President
Method of selection	Direct election	Elected by Parliament	Elected by Parliament	Direct election
Legislature	Bicameral	Bicameral	Bicameral	Bicameral
Lower house	House of Representatives	House of Commons	Bundestag	National Assembly
Upper house	Senate	House of Lords	Bundesrat	Senate
Power of upper house	Equal	Weaker	Equal on state issues	Weaker
Electoral System				
Lower house	Single-member districts	Single-member districts	Proportional representation and single-member districts	Single-member districts
Upper house	Statewide elections	Inheritance and appointment	Appointed by states	Appointed by communes
Major parties	Democrats Republicans	Labour Liberal Democrats Conservatives	Linke Greens Social Democrats Free Democrats Christian Democrats (CDU/CSU) AfD	Communists Socialists Greens En Marche! MoDem Republicans National Front

Source: Compiled by the author; population and GNP statistics are from the *CIA World Factbook, 2017.*

a separation of powers that is uncommon for a parliamentary government. These contrasting institutional forms should influence citizen politics in each nation.

Electoral systems are equally diverse. Great Britain and the United States select the members of their national legislatures from single-member districts, where a plurality is sufficient for election. Germany uses a hybrid system for Bundestag elections; half the deputies are elected from single-member districts, and half are selected proportionately from party lists. The French electoral system is based on deputies winning a majority in single-member districts, with a second ballot (*tour*) if no candidate receives a majority on the first ballot. Several studies demonstrated that such institutional arrangements can affect voting behavior and electoral outcomes (Shugart and Taagepera 2017; Dalton and Anderson 2011; Powell 2000).

The party systems of these four nations also vary. Party competition in the United States is usually limited to the Democratic and Republican parties. Both are broad "catchall" parties that combine diverse political groups into weakly structured electoral coalitions. In contrast, most European political parties are hierarchically organized and controlled by the party leadership. Candidates are elected primarily because of their party labels and not because of their personal attributes; most party deputies vote as a bloc in the legislature. Party options are also more diverse in Europe. British voters can select from at least three major parties; Germans have six major parties in the Bundestag. French party politics is synonymous with diversity and political polarization. Dozens of French parties run in elections, and a large number win seats in parliament. France, a nation of perpetual political effervescence, provides the spice of comparative politics.

When possible, I broaden the cross-national comparisons to include other affluent established democracies.

A NEW STYLE OF CITIZEN POLITICS

The findings of this book can best be described by asking you to do a thought experiment: If you are a student, think back to what politics must have been like several decades ago—when your grandparents were your age. The Constitution has not really changed since then, the institutions of government are basically the same, and the Democrats and Republicans still contend in elections. But, as I argue in this book, the people and politics have changed—and this has transformed the democratic process.

The changing nature of citizen political behavior derives from the socioeconomic transformation of the Western societies over the past fifty years. These countries are developing a set of characteristics that collectively represent a new form of *advanced industrial* or *postindustrial* society (Inglehart 1990; Crouch 1999). These changes are summarized in figure 1.1.

The most dramatic changes involve economic conditions. An unprecedented expansion of economic well-being occurred in the second half of the twentieth

Figure 1.1 The New Citizen Politics

Modernizing social conditions create an advanced industrial society where citizens' skills and values change, and this produces a new style of citizen politics.

Changing Social Conditions → **Social Modernization** → **Changing Publics** → **Changing Skills and Values** → **New Style of Citizen Politics**

Changing Social Conditions

Living Standards
Affluence and well-being

Work Experience
From blue collar to knowledge workers

Education
More people with college degrees

Access to Information
An explosion of news and information sources

Gender Roles
More active social, economic role for women

Social Diversity
Civil rights and opportunities for minorities

Advanced Industrial Society

Changing Skills and Values

New Style of Citizen Politics

Cognitive Mobilization
A more sophisticated and self-directed citizen

Political Participation
A growth of direct action and contentious activities

Postmaterial Values
A shift from materialist to postmaterialist values

Issues
Interest in New Politics issues and more liberal views

Partisan Politics
Decreased reliance on long-term cues and more reliance on issues and candidate image

Political Support
Stronger democratic ideals paired with criticism of government

century. The economies of Western Europe and North America grew at phenomenal rates in the post–World War II decades. For example, analysts describe the astonishing expansion of the West German economy as the *Wirtschaftswunder* (Economic Miracle). Average income levels in our four nations are several times greater than at any time in prewar history. By most economic standards, these four nations rank among the most affluent nations of the world—and the most affluent in human history. Current economic conditions may distract our attention from the basic economic trends over the past fifty years.

A restructured labor force is another major social change. The number of people employed in agriculture has decreased dramatically in most Western nations, and working-class employment has also declined. At the same time, employment in the service sector and professional occupations has increased markedly. In addition, because of the expansion of national and local governments, public employment now constitutes a significant share of the labor force. Richard Florida (2003) provocatively argued that a new creative class—individuals who create and utilize knowledge—are a vanguard of social and cultural change. Only a minority of jobs in today's economy existed in your grandparents' time. Moreover, social mobility and different career experiences change individuals' values and their outlooks on life. A blue-collar industrial worker on an assembly line, for instance, has a much different life experience than a computer programmer at Google—and this should affect their values.

Advanced industrialism also changes the context of the workplace and the residential neighborhood. Urbanization alters life expectations and lifestyles. It brings an increasing separation of the home from the workplace, a greater diversity of life experiences and interests, an expanded range of career opportunities, and more geographic and social mobility. With these trends come changes in the forms of social interaction, as communal forms of organization are replaced by voluntary associations, which are less institutionalized and more spontaneous. Communities are becoming less bounded; people are involved in increasingly complex and competing social networks that divide their loyalties, and ties to institutions are becoming more fluid.

Educational opportunities also have expanded rapidly over the past several decades. If your grandparents went to school in 1950 or before, most ended their studies with a high school education or less. Access to education steadily increased as minimal education standards were raised and university enrollments skyrocketed. Today, more than three-quarters of American youth and about half of college-age European youth have some form of tertiary schooling. This trend has fundamentally changed the educational composition of contemporary publics.

Citizen access to political information has also changed dramatically. The electronic media, especially television, have experienced exceptional growth, and access to other information sources, such as books and magazines, has grown. Even more revolutionary is the explosion of electronic information processing: computers, the Internet, blogs, Twitter, and related technologies. It seems like any piece of

information is only a Google away. Again, the information environment of today and that of the 1950s–60s almost bear no comparison. Information is no longer a scarce commodity. The contemporary information problem is how to adapt to life in cyberspace, managing an ever-growing volume of sophisticated knowledge.

One of the most basic changes involves the social, economic, and political status of women and minority groups. As noted later in the chapter, the social and political roles of women have been transformed from a restrictive and non-political role to active participants in society and politics. For instance, Britain, Germany, and several other European nations have had a woman head of government, and the 2017 French presidential election included a woman in the final runoff. Before 1945, French women were not even allowed to vote. Similarly, legal and social limitations on the rights and opportunities of racial and ethnic groups have diminished—most dramatically in the United States but also in Europe. Once "the public" was defined as white men (sometimes only property owners), and now the definition of citizenship is more inclusive.

Western governments have also expanded their involvement in society. Government is increasingly responsible for protecting and managing society and the economy. Many European societies have extensive welfare programs, in which a network of generous social programs protects the individual against economic or medical hardship. Unemployment, illness, and similar problems still occur; but under the welfare state, their consequences are less dire than in the past. In addition, most people now see the government as responsible for protecting the environment, ensuring social rights, enabling lifestyle choices, and a host of other new obligations.

Despite these past trends, many political analysts ask whether these patterns can continue. Everywhere, it seems, there has been a retrenchment in government social programs. Increased international economic competition in a globalized economy has created new economic strains within these nations. Elation about the end of the Cold War and the development of new democracies is tempered by worries about growing nationalism, international terrorism, ethnic conflict, and new financial burdens.

Admittedly, the miraculous economic growth rates of the post–World War II period now seem like distant history, especially in the wake of the 2008 Great Recession. Yet, the transformation of advanced industrial democracies involves more than simply the politics of affluence. Changes in occupational and social structures are continuing, and with them an alteration in living conditions and lifestyles. Expanded educational opportunities represent an enduring trait of modern societies. The information revolution is continuing—in fact, it is growing at an amazing rate. Advanced industrial societies are dramatically different from their 1950s predecessors. My expectation is that change will continue, albeit at a slower rate in the decades ahead.

This book maintains that one result of these social trends is the development of a new style of citizen politics. My premise is that as the socioeconomic

characteristics of these nations change, the characteristics of the public change as well. More educational opportunities mean a growth in political skills and resources, producing the most sophisticated publics in the history of democracies. Changing economic conditions redefine citizens' issue interests. The weakening of social networks and institutional loyalties is associated with the decline of traditional political alignments and voting patterns. Contemporary publics and democratic politics have been dramatically transformed over the past several decades.

The parts of this new style of citizen politics are not always, or necessarily, linked together. Some parts may be transitory; others may be coincidental. Nevertheless, several traits coexist for the present, defining a new pattern of citizen political behavior. This book systematically describes this new pattern of political thought and action. Figure 1.1 summarizes this causal process, with the new patterns of citizen politics listed on the right of the figure.

One aspect of the new citizen politics is political engagement (chapters 2–4). Expanding political skills and resources increase the cognitive sophistication of the citizenry. In addition, many people are placing greater emphasis on participating in political and economic decision making. Participation in elections is the most common form of political action—but voting is declining in most countries. However, protest, citizen action groups, boycotts, online participation, and direct forms of action are increasing. People are less likely to be passive subjects and more likely to demand a say in the decisions affecting their lives. The new style of citizen politics reflects a more active involvement in the democratic process.

Another broad area of change involves the values and attitudes of the public (chapters 5–6). Industrial societies aimed at providing affluence and economic security. The success of advanced industrialism fulfills many basic economic needs for a sizable sector of society. Thus, some people are shifting their concerns to new noneconomic cultural issues (Inglehart 1990, 2018). Several of these issues are common to affluent democracies: environmental protection, gender equality, LGBTQ rights, and social equality. In the last decade or so, liberal government policies on these issues have also generated a conservative opposition and new conservative parties. In some instances, historic conditions focus these general concerns on specific national problems—for example, racial equality in the United States, regional conflicts in Britain, or center–periphery differences in France. Many of these issues are now loosely connected to an alternative political agenda that is another element of the new style of citizen politics.

Partisan politics is also changing (chapters 7–11). Comparative electoral research used to emphasize the stability of democratic party systems. This situation has changed. There is increased fragmentation and volatility of these party systems. Declining class voting differences reflect the general erosion in the social bases of voting. In most nations, the public's identification with political parties and affect toward parties has decreased. These patterns have produced a partial *dealignment* of contemporary party systems (Dalton 2012; Dalton and Wattenberg 2000).

These trends are at least partially the result of the addition of new issues to the political agenda and the difficulties of the established parties to respond to these issues. New parties have arisen across the face of Europe—ranging from green parties to new right parties. Trump's 2016 victory in the United States followed a wave of new far-right parties in Europe. The British decision to vote against European Union membership is one example, and the leader of France's far-right party was in the two-party runoff in the 2017 French elections. This book will discuss the evidence of whether this is a sign of democracy's changing future, or a minority protest against how much progressive change is reshaping these societies.

These new political tensions also increase party volatility. Unsophisticated voters once relied on social-group cues and partisan cues to make their political decisions. Because of the dramatic spread of education and information sources, more people can now deal with the complexities of politics and make their own political decisions. Consequently, issues and other short-term factors are more important as influences on voting choices. The new style of citizen politics features a more issue-oriented and candidate-oriented electorate.

Finally, attitudes toward government represent a new paradox for democracy (chapter 12). The democratic process has become more inclusive, and the government has generally improved the quality of life. But at the same time, people have become more critical of the government. The conflict over new issues and new participation patterns may offer a partial explanation of these trends. In addition, emerging value priorities that stress self-actualization and autonomy may stimulate skepticism of elite-controlled hierarchical organizations (such as bureaucracies, political parties, and large interest groups).

One thing you quickly learn about political science is that serious researchers can reach different conclusions based on similar evidence. Many scholars still question this book's basic premises of political change. However, over the previous decades and editions of this book, I have seen a growing body of evidence that affirms the basic premises of this study. Still, begin your reading from a skeptical position, and then see if the evidence supports it. This is what good researchers do.

This is an exciting time to study public opinion because so much is changing. The puzzle for researchers, students, and citizens is to understand how democracy functions in this new context. This new style of citizen politics creates strains for the political systems of advanced industrial democracies. Protests, social movements, partisan volatility, and political skepticism are disrupting the traditional political order. Adjustment to new issue concerns and new patterns of citizen participation may be a difficult process. More people now take democratic ideals seriously, and they expect political systems to live up to those ideals. Democracy isn't an end state, but an evolutionary process. Thus, the new style of citizen politics is a sign of vitality and an opportunity for these societies to make further progress toward their democratic goals.

SUGGESTED READINGS

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NOTES

1. See appendix A for information on the major public opinion surveys used in this book. Neither these archives nor the original collectors of the surveys bear responsibility for the analyses presented here.
2. For a brief review of these nations, see Powell, Strom, Manion, and Dalton (2017). More detailed national studies are found in Norton (2010) for Britain; Langenbacher and Conradt (2017) for Germany; and Safran (2008) for France.

POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC

THE NATURE OF CITIZEN BELIEFS

Awhile ago, the *Los Angeles Times* ran an article about a public opinion survey testing Americans' knowledge of pop culture versus politics.[1] The survey found that more people could name two of Snow White's seven dwarfs than could name two members of the U.S. Supreme Court. More Americans knew the name of the British author of the Harry Potter books than the name of Britain's prime minister. More people knew the names of the Three Stooges than the names of the three branches of the U.S. government.

This article and many more like it illustrate a continuing debate about the political abilities of average citizens—their levels of knowledge, understanding, and interest in politics. And even more centrally, how people make political decisions. For voters to make meaningful decisions, they must know something about the issues and understand the available options. People also need sufficient knowledge of how the political system works if they want to influence the actions of government. In short, for democratic politics to be purposeful, people must have at least a basic level of political skills.

Studying citizens' political sophistication helps us to understand the public opinion data presented in this book. With what depth of knowledge and conviction are opinions held? Do responses to public opinion surveys represent reasoned assessments of the issues or the snap judgments of individuals faced by an interviewer on their doorsteps? It's common to hear the public labeled as uninformed (especially when public opinion conflicts with the speaker's own views). Conversely, the public cannot be wiser than when it supports one's position. Can we judge the merits of either position based on the empirical evidence from public opinion surveys?

I've come to think of this research literature in terms of a debate between economists and psychologists—with political scientists caught in the middle. The economists build models assuming that people are rational robots, like Spock or Data in the old Star Trek TV series. Psychologists, in contrast, believe that people think in complex ways that involve emotion, biases, and heuristic behavior. There are elements of both in the citizenry, and thus debates about the public's political abilities are one of the major controversies in political behavior research.

THE SUPERCITIZEN

One approach to public opinion holds that democracy is workable only when people have a high degree of political information and sophistication—the Spock and Data model. John Stuart Mill, John Locke, Alexis de Tocqueville, and other writers saw these public traits as requirements for a successful democracy. Otherwise, misguided or unscrupulous elites might manipulate an uninformed and unsophisticated public. In a sense, these theorists posited a supercitizen model similar to economists' notion of a fully informed and rational actor: for democracy to survive, the public must be a paragon of civic virtue.

This ideal of the democratic supercitizen is seen in the popular lore about the sophistication of Americans.[2] Tocqueville (1966) praised the civic and political involvement of Americans when he described the United States in the 1830s. Voters in early America supposedly yearned for the stimulating political debates of elections and flocked to political rallies in great numbers. New England town hall meetings became a legendary example of the American political spirit. Even on the frontier, there was a common lore that conversations around the general store's cracker barrel displayed a deep interest in politics.

History painted a less positive picture of the public in many European nations. In contrast to America, the right to vote came late to most Europeans, often delayed until the twentieth century. The aristocratic institutions and deferential traditions of British politics limited public participation beyond the act of voting and severely restricted the size of the eligible electorate. In France, the instability of the political system supposedly produced a sense of "incivism" (lack of civic engagement), leading people to avoid political discussions and involvement. And Germany's experience with the Third Reich strengthened the belief that a sophisticated, involved, and democratic public is necessary for democracy to succeed.

REALITY VERSUS A THEORETICAL IDEAL

The start of scientific public opinion surveying in the 1950s and 1960s provided the first opportunity to move beyond the claims of philosophers and

social commentators. It was finally possible to test the lofty theorizing about the democratic citizen against reality. The public itself was directly consulted.

In contrast to the classic images celebrated in democratic theory, public opinion surveys presented an unflattering picture of the American public. Political sophistication seemed to fall far short of the supercitizen model. Most people's political interest and involvement barely extended beyond casting an occasional vote at election time. Furthermore, Americans apparently brought little political understanding to their participation in politics. It wasn't clear that people based their voting decisions on rational evaluations of the candidates and their issue positions. Instead, habitual group loyalties and personalistic considerations seemed to shape the election choices of most voters. A seminal work in the area summarized these findings as follows:

> Our data reveal that certain requirements commonly assumed for the successful operation of democracy are not met by the behavior of the "average" citizen. . . . Many vote without real involvement in the election. . . . The citizen is not highly informed on the details of the campaign. . . . In any rigorous or narrow sense, the voters are not highly rational. (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954, 307–10)

The landmark study *The American Voter* (Campbell et al. 1960) similarly documented a lack of political sophistication by the American electorate. Few people were well-informed on the issues of the day. People seemed to lack a sophisticated view of the political world. American ideals of democratic deliberation fell short of expectations. Evidence from other democracies similarly argued that citizens had limited interest or information about politics—much like the example at the beginning of this chapter.

In an influential essay on mass belief systems, Philip Converse (1964) spelled out several criteria for measuring political sophistication. As modeled in figure 2.1, Converse said there should be a basic *structure* at the core of individual political beliefs. An ideological framework such as liberalism or conservatism presumably provides this structure, at least at higher levels of sophistication. In addition, there should be *constraint* between issue positions. Constraint means a strong agreement between one's core beliefs and specific issue positions. A person who is liberal on one issue is expected to be liberal on others, and opinions on one issue should be ideologically (or at least logically) consistent with other beliefs. Finally, Converse said that issue opinions should be relatively *stable* over time so that voters held enduring beliefs that guided their behavior.

The overall result should be a tightly structured system of beliefs with issues and core values strongly interrelated. Such a belief system was seen as a prerequisite for understanding politics, evaluating the flow of political events, and making rational political choices. The lack of such belief system would mean that political events would pass before the individual's eyes with little understanding of their meaning,

Figure 2.1   Model of a Structured Belief System

Early research claimed that issue positions should be interconnected and linked to core values for citizens to make consistent and reasonable choices.

Issue opinion

Issue opinion

Structuring principle (ideology)

Issue opinion

Issue opinion
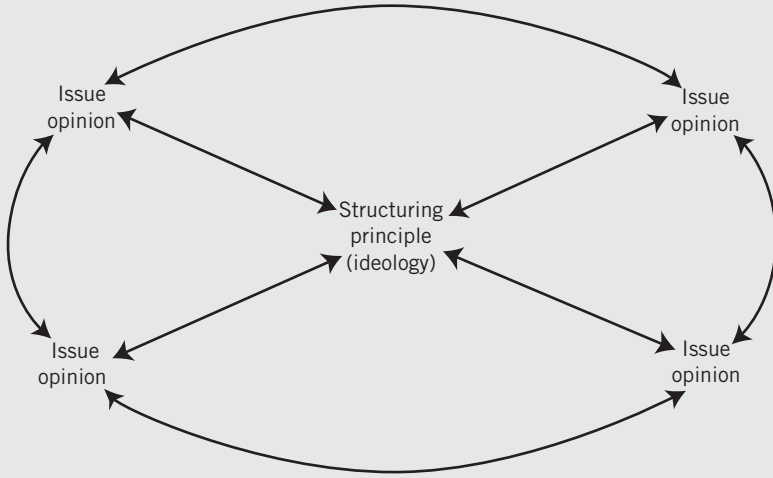
and voting decisions would be based on undigested information and lack rationality. The citizenry, in short, would provide a poor basis for a democratic political process.

This was a model of public opinion that approximated a rational robot model. In testing this model, however, Converse concluded that most Americans fell short. First, most people didn't judge political phenomena in ideological terms, such as liberalism/conservatism or capitalism/socialism. People appeared unfamiliar with terms such as *liberal* or *conservative*, and barely a tenth of Americans used ideological concepts to structure their belief systems. Second, Converse found only a weak relationship between issues that seemingly were connected. For example, people who felt taxes were too high nevertheless favored more spending on many specific government programs. Third, issue beliefs were not stable over time; many people seemed to change their opinions randomly across elections. The lack of structure, constraint, and stability led Converse (1970) to conclude that public opinion researchers are often studying "nonattitudes"—that is, many people apparently do not have informed opinions even on issues of long-standing political concern.

The American Voter declared that the electorate "is almost completely unable to judge the rationality of government actions; knowing little of the particular policies and what has led to them, the mass electorate isn't able either to appraise its goals or the appropriateness of the means chosen to secure these goals" (Campbell et al. 1960, 543). Other studies showed that many people could not name their elected representatives, were unfamiliar with the institutions of government, and did not understand the mechanics of the political process.

The image of the American voter had fallen to a new low, and some research claims that little has changed (for example, Lewis-Beck et al. 2008). Empirical studies repeatedly demonstrate the limited political information of most citizens. A recent study thus asks the provocative question:

> Voters don't know very much, aren't aware of how little they know; aren't particularly proficient at getting the information they need, and can't remember the information once they've learned it. The problem is made worse by politicians and interest groups that actively hide information, by issues that are often complex enough to stymie the experts, and by the vast number of important issues. . . . How can democracy possibly be successful when it relies on the choices of voters who know so little? (Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012, 32–33)

The image of the unsophisticated citizen seemed equally applicable to Europeans. Europeans lacked well-formed opinions on the pressing issues of the day. For instance, 60 percent of British in the 1960s did not recognize the terms *Left* and *Right* as they applied to politics (Butler and Stokes 1969). And the telltale signs of nonattitudes—weak linkages between opinions on related issues and high opinion instability over time—were apparent.

The most recent assault on the citizenry has come from Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels' (2017) provocative study of citizens and democracy. They argue that models of democracy based on sophisticated citizenry reflect "fairy tales" and a "folk theory" of democracy at odds with reality. They highlighted the limited information of many voters. Then they offered a buffet line of examples where public opinion and electoral choices seem flawed from a rationalist perspective, such as voters punishing incumbents for shark attacks, floods, and droughts. Empirical reality apparently falls short of the democratic ideal.

ELITIST THEORY OF DEMOCRACY

Having shown that most people apparently fail to meet the requirements of classic democratic theory, political scientists faced a paradox: most individuals aren't "good" democratic citizens, and yet democracies such as the United States and Great Britain have existed for generations. Gradually, scholars developed an *elitist theory of democracy* to interpret these survey findings in a positive light.

This elitist theory turned the supposed limitations of the public into a strength of democracy. It held that politics might prove unworkable if every person were active on every issue at all times. Images of the centrifugal forces that destroyed the Weimar Republic in the 1930s generated concerns about the possible effects of excessive participation. These authors suggest that the model citizen "is not the active citizen; he is the potentially active citizen" (Almond and Verba 1963, 347). In other words, people must believe that they can influence the government and

become active if the issue is sufficiently important. Few will realize this potential, however. The balance between action and potential action presumably ensures that political elites have enough freedom to make necessary decisions while keeping the public interest in mind.

Another element of this elitist theory stresses the heterogeneity of the public. "Some people are and should be highly interested in politics, but not everyone is or needs to be" (Berelson et al. 1954, 315). From this perspective, the responsiveness of the political system is secured by a core of active citizens and political elites, leaving the rest of the public blissfully uninformed and uninvolved. The mix between involved and indifferent voters supposedly ensures both the stability and flexibility of democratic systems.

The elitist theory of democracy is drawn from the realities of political life—or at least from the hard evidence of survey research. It is, however, a very undemocratic theory of democracy. The theory maintains that "the democratic citizen . . . must be active, yet passive; involved, yet not too involved; influential, yet deferential" (Almond and Verba 1963, 478–79). The values and goals of democracy were at least partially obscured by a mountain of survey data.

Some analysts even advocate an extreme version of this model, implying that the rise in citizen activism is undemocratic and politically destabilizing. For example, Fareed Zakaria, who has a Harvard Ph.D. and hosts a CNN talk show, has argued that we suffer from too much democracy (Zakaria 2003; also Rauch and Wittes 2017). A libertarian philosopher, Jason Brennan (2017) described democracy as based on the rule of the ignorant and the irrational. To fix this situation, he proposed ways to improve democracy through epistocratic reforms (rule of the knowledgeable): voter competency tests, plural voting for the knowledgeable, veto privileges for the knowledgeable, or voting by lottery. All that is missing is a yearning for a philosopher king.

If a supportive and quiescent public ensures a smoothly functioning political system, then isn't it virtually the duty of the individual to remain uninvolved? Hurray for sitting on the couch and watching TV or surfing the Web!

I believe that the elitist theory overlooks the complexities of the democratic process and takes an unsophisticated view of the evidence. For example, those who highlight the failings of voters, then ignore the same behavior (or worse) among political elites. Members of the U.S. Congress (or European MPs) routinely endorse formal budget limits and then act to circumvent these same limits in the next piece of legislation. In one vote, they endorse strict measures to control crime; in the next, they refuse to ban assault weapons.[3] Such inconsistencies in elite actions are treated as examples of the complexity of politics, but the same patterns in public opinion are considered signs of limited sophistication. And oftentimes the failures of citizens arise because they accept the false claims of political elites. On many if not most issues, there are knowledgeable elites advocating each side of a controversy. George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Ted Cruz, and Donald Trump all have Ivy League degrees—so obviously education and political sophistication aren't a guide to the "correct" public policy.[4]

This chapter argues that this picture of the public's abilities isn't nearly as bleak as that painted by the elitist theory of democracy. Indeed, Arthur Lupia (2007) provocatively argued that the elitism of researchers contributes to their negative image of the public. As our scientific knowledge has increased, so, too, has our understanding of how people actually make political decisions.

POLITICAL SOPHISTICATION RECONSIDERED

When I read the criticisms of democratic citizens, it reminds me of the old story about bumblebees. The entomologists measured its body and wingspan; they concluded that aerodynamic models dictated that they couldn't fly. But they do.

Democracy is flawed and can't work—except it does. This book challenges past claims of an unqualified public on several points. The question isn't whether citizens differ in their political information—they obviously do. Instead, the question for democracy is whether most people have sufficient information to make reasonable choices that adequately reflect their self-interests. And, would democracy produce better governance if only the "knowledgeable" participated? I think this framework allows a better view of how citizens and democracy actually function.

Rational Choice versus Reasonable Choice

In the decades since the first public opinion surveys generated their negative images of the public, we have learned a great deal about how people process information and make political (and nonpolitical) decisions. This research has stripped away the idealized standards of democracy based on fully informed, sophisticated, citizen choices and the rationalizations of elitist democratic theory. It replaced the robot model with a model of human behavior.

Researchers focused on how people make *reasonable choices* in most instances. People make political choices on a regular basis, whether those decisions involve voting in an election, donating funds to a political group, or participating in a political discussion. Few people meet the ideal expectations of democratic theorists in rationally evaluating all the information that might go into such choices, but most people at most times are making reasonable political choices.

Political Cognition

In the last several decades there has been a scientific revolution in thinking about how we think. Cognitive research provides a new understanding of political cognition, information processing, and decision making. We face many decisions every day, millions in our lives. Some are large, some are small; they vary in importance. In addition, there is too much information in the world for people to retain all they experience. The *Economist* recently reported that an average person reads around 10 megabytes (MB) worth of material a day, hears 400MB a day, and sees one MB of information every second! Human memory is limited, and

most information—about our lives, our community, politics, and other life experiences—isn't retained. (Data on the *Star Trek* TV program is an exception.) So, just as political scientists decry the public's limited knowledge about politics, economists say people need to know more about economics, natural scientists lament our limited knowledge of science, and geographers point to voids in our knowledge of the world.[5] But to acquire "full information" is a daunting task, especially for politics, which is often secondary to immediate life concerns.[6]

Two psychologists, Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky, did path-breaking research that explored how people navigate this constant decision-making process (Kahneman 2012; Kahneman and Tversky 1984; Tversky and Kahneman 1981). The lesson is simple: people—students, professors, voters, and elected politicians—aren't computers. Research demonstrated that much of human action is guided not by a thoughtful, deliberative calculus of costs and benefits, but by intuitions and feelings developed from previous experience, emotions, moral values, and personal traits. This "fast thinking" is the most commonly used.

In some instances, we resort to the rational calculus such as reading about a financial or political decision facing us, and systematically comparing alternatives. This is the "slow thinking" that economists swoon over. These two different cognitive processes are firmware in our brains, updated by new experiences. These insights transformed thinking about thinking, and won Kahneman, a psychologist, the Nobel Prize in Economics.

For example, this research suggests that rather than memorizing specific events or details, the fast-thinking process judges new information and updates a running tally of whether a public policy or candidate is liked or disliked (Lodge and Taber 2013; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Schwarz and Bohner 2001). To illustrate: you are very unlikely to recall all the information you've heard about the health care reform enacted by the Obama administration, but this doesn't mean that you don't have views on the issue. When you read a story or hear something from a friend, you update your general impression of whether this issue is good or bad for people like you.

Thus, opinions aren't necessarily random responses to a survey questionnaire if the person cannot explain the details. Many political opinions reflect accumulated information judged by the brain's firmware. And specific elements are connected to other elements through positive or negative links that can be subconscious to the person. For example, when I mentioned the Obamacare reform, your brain implicitly connects this to your feelings about Obama, a recent health care experience, Trump's criticisms of this program, and other connections.

Figure 2.2 is a very simplistic and two-dimensional version of this logic. The width of each link shows the strength of the connection between two elements; this can be either a positive or negative feeling. Not all the connections exist for any one person, and other connections may exist. When asked about Obamacare by a friend (or a survey researcher), the mind automatically draws upon prior learning that has links to this stimulus. (A different network of connections would exist for attitudes toward gender equality or building a strong defense.) Some of these connections are conscious and can be explained to your friend or the survey interviewer, but

Figure 2.2   Feelings about Obamacare and Connections to Other Factors

Figure 2.2   Feelings about Obamacare and Connections to Other Factors
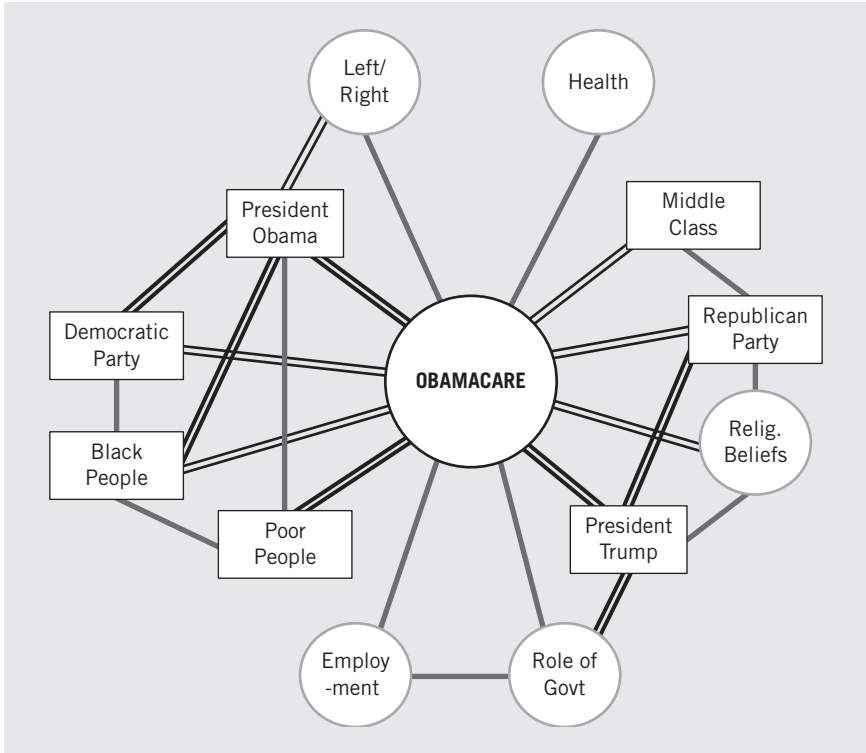
Source: Author

there is a deeper store of information that is subconsciously retrieved by a question about Obamacare. Moreover, the parts of the network stimulated by a topic can vary over time, depending on the context of the discussion, or because of other factors. Information and the fluidity of reactions can coexist.

This matrix approach is much different than Converse's model in figure 2.1. Instead of a central ideological belief constraining and organizing beliefs, like an operating system controlling the parts of a computer, this approach describes a network connecting divergent sources of information to provide positive/negative opinions. This is a more organic and variable way of thinking about thinking. The human brain developed to quickly discriminate between what are perceived as good and bad stimuli, and it does this very effectively and quickly (Lodge and Taber 2013).

So when does the rational "slow-thinking" mind come into play? After initial affective reactions, a person can try to retrieve additional information from their

long-term memory. They might remember specific information about Obamacare from news reports. Or they draw upon social cues, such as comments by their doctor on the last visit, or information from a friend who follows this topic. These cumulated experiences provide a reasonable—but sometimes imperfect—basis for decision making that is applied to politics, our consumer behavior, our social behavior, and other human activities.

In addition, cognitive research offers a surprising insight into how some people collect and retrieve information. For many topics, including politics, research suggests that some people selectively retrieve information *to justify initial intuitive judgments or biases* rather than neutrally collecting and judging the facts. Jonathan Haidt (2012) calls this "motivated reasoning."[7] As an example, when an opinion survey asks a person to explain why they like a candidate, the individual may assemble a list of things that confirm their affective preferences, and overlook or discount factors that are inconsistent with their biases (Lodge and Taber 2013; Goren 2012). This is especially relevant when we discuss party identification in chapter 9 or candidate images in chapter 10. Thus, Democrats just happen to like the candidate representing their party, and Republicans do the same with their party's candidate (Bisgaard and Slothuus 2018; Leeper and Slothuus 2014). In short, objective reasoning is hard to accomplish, and it isn't a standard pattern of how people act and react.[8]

One might think this research validates the elitist theory of democracy. If this is how ordinary people "think," then we should strip away their vote. But several of Haidt's examples come from political elites. White House press secretaries lying for their boss and citing alternative facts. Or British MPs rationalizing fraudulent housing allowances, until they are caught by a media exposé. Political experts have their own political biases, and they are better at selectively using facts to justify their positions. Elites play the game of motivated reasoning at the expert level, which can make them even less likely to take positions that vary from their predispositions. Cognitive researchers are describing how humans think, which applies even to the sophisticated and the well-educated.

Reasoning can sometimes change our affective predispositions, and this is more likely when interacting with friends and neighbors who have their own experiences and judgments (Haidt 2012, ch. 4). Other people can see the strengths and weaknesses of our opinions better than we do. Social networks and diverse external cues are important contributors to reasoned judgments and changing opinions.

There is still a very active debate on the nature of mass belief systems. Objective, detailed rationale thinking à la Converse appears exceedingly rare. My impression is that scholarly views are shifting from a model similar to the one that Converse proposed to a model closer to the network approach of cognitive research. And then, other factors come into play.

Issue Publics

Issue specialization is another method that citizens use to make reasonable choices with incomplete information (Oppenheimer and Edwards 2012, chs. 7–8).

Instead of viewing belief systems as closely interconnecting the full range of political issues, as Converse originally proposed, people concentrate their attention on a few topics of personal interest. The total electorate is comprised of several partially overlapping *issue publics* (Converse 1964). Being part of an issue public implies that people devote more attention to the issue and have more informed beliefs. Many farmers, for example, closely monitor government agricultural policy while paying scant attention to urban renewal programs. Parents of school-age children may be interested in education policy, while the elderly are interested in Social Security. The largest issue publics generally exist for topics of broad concern, such as economic policy, taxes, and basic social programs. At the other extreme, only a few people regularly follow issues of foreign aid, international trade, or agriculture. Very few citizens are interested in every issue, but most citizens are members of at least one issue public. To paraphrase the humorist Will Rogers, "Everybody is sophisticated, only on different subjects."

This framework also suggests that research should assess political interests like an open essay exam question (what did you learn in this class that is important?), rather than a closed-book, multiple-choice exam with the questions chosen by someone else. Consider how the results can be much different.

The concept of issue publics influences how we think about political sophistication. When people define politics according to their own interests, a surprising level of political awareness often appears. David RePass (1971) documented a high level of rational issue voting when citizens identified their own issue interests. Similarly, research demonstrates that members of an issue public are more likely to follow media coverage of the issue, gather information on the issue, hold stable preferences, and use these preferences as a basis of voting choice (Hutchings 2003; Krosnick 1990). Therefore, survey data that demonstrate low consistency in a long list of issue opinions and low stability in opinions over time do not mean that the electorate is unsophisticated. The alternative explanation is that not all citizens are interested in and try to keep informed on all issues.

Some political scientists view issue publics as a negative feature of politics because a proliferation of issue publics works against policy making based on a broad, coherent ideological framework. The reason is that policy interests in one area aren't judged against interests in other policy areas. Policy fragmentation is potentially problematic, but such criticism may be overstated. If people limit their issue interests, it doesn't mean that they fail to judge these issues in broader terms; different clusters of issue interests still may emanate from a common underlying set of values. In addition, Robert Lane (1962, 1973) pointed out the potential negative consequences of an overly structured belief system—for example, dogmatism and intolerance. In some ways, therefore, issue publics may benefit the democratic process.

Heuristics

A third aspect of reasonable choice is that people use shortcuts or heuristics to simplify decision making (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Barker and Hansen 2005; Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia 2007). Samuel Popkin (1991, 218) writes that "the

use of information shortcuts is . . . an inescapable fact of life, and will occur no matter how educated we are, how much information we have, and how much thinking we do." A heuristic provides political cues about how people like oneself might view political issues or parties at election time and is a shortcut to collecting and processing information.

People can turn to a wide variety of heuristics or cue-givers. Social groups are a common source of political cues (see chapter 8). Many policy issues involve conflicts among class, religious, ethnic, or other social groupings. One's ties or feelings toward a social group can be a guidepost in dealing with policy questions. French steelworkers, for example, might prefer larger social welfare programs because the labor union suggests it will benefit workers like themselves, and they vote for a leftist party that the union endorses (and that presumably represents the workers' interests). When social conflicts are salient, and the parties take clear positions on these conflicts, then social characteristics can provide effective cues for following politics. People may not explain their policy preferences with sophisticated ideological arguments or reference to specific legislative proposals, but overall they still are making reasonable political choices.

Partisanship is an even more powerful heuristic than social group cues (see chapter 9). Many people early in their lives develop an enduring attachment to a political party that they believe best represents their views. Parties are central participants in democratic politics, so most political phenomena can be judged in reference to the parties. Because most elections involve a choice among parties, party attachments obviously can simplify voting choices. In Western Europe, where parties act as cohesive units, party voting is an effective and efficient shortcut for voting choice. The heterogeneity of American parties lessens the policy content of party voting, but the complexity of American elections makes party a valuable voting cue when one must decide on a long list of federal, state, and local candidates.

Partisanship can also shape evaluations of political leaders and new political issues in ways that mirror motivated reasoning. If voters are unsure about an issue, party cues can suggest where their interests lie. If you are watching a member of Congress on television, you can predict what she will say depending on whether there is a D or R after her name. An issue supported by one's party is more likely to benefit oneself, while the policies of the opposition party are suspect. In sum, because of its heuristic value, party identification frequently is viewed as a central component in citizens' belief systems.

Left/Right (or liberal/conservative) orientations are another potential source of political cues. Most people do not express sophisticated ideological views, but they still can locate themselves within a broad ideological family (Jacoby 1991; Fuchs and Klingemann 1989). A Left/Right orientation provides a framework for evaluating political objects. When an individual describes a candidate as too liberal or another as too conservative, he or she is using a shortcut to learn about the candidates' views on specific issues and evaluate them on this basis.

Some people may rely on the media for political cues. Newspapers list their editorial endorsements before elections and give editorial advice on the issues of

the day. Watching FOX or MSNBC gives a person cues about how Republicans or Democrats think about issues, just as reading a Labour or Conservative-oriented newspaper in Britain provides clear political cues. Similarly, the endorsements of social groups, political groups, and respected elected officials can be an effective heuristic. If one is an environmentalist, and the Sierra Club endorses an issue, this provides valuable cues about the content of the issue. Other people turn to their family or friends for political advice, or they learn about political choices from coworkers. Indeed, the world is full of political cues that individuals may choose. Experiments by Arthur Lupia and Mathew McCubbins (1998) demonstrated that when individuals gain information from a trusted political source, they can make reasonable choices that reflect their self-interest.

Table 2.1 illustrates some of the diverse criteria that are used in making political judgments. The *Political Action* project (Barnes, Kaase, et al. 1979) asked people in the United States, Britain, and Germany to describe the good and bad points

Table 2.1   Party Evaluations

People use diverse criteria in evaluating parties; few are ideologues, but they judge parties in terms of group ties, their leaders, and their policy positions.

Criteria for Judging Parties	United States		Great Britain	West Germany	
	1975	2004	1974	1974	1994
Ideological concepts	21	20	21	34	14
Social groups	40	37	41	45	42
Party organizations	49	48	35	66	69
Policy concepts	45	43	46	53	51
Nature of the times	64	28	59	86	—
Political figures	40	11	18	38	32
Intrinsic values/other	46	40	65	49	41
No content	14	22	18	6	21
Total	319	249	303	377	270

Sources: Political Action Study, 1974–75; 2004 American National Election Study; 1994 Klingemann German Media Study.

Note: The figure presents the percentage of people who used each criterion. Totals exceed 100 percent because multiple responses were possible; the later time points for the United States and Germany are estimates because the coding system was not fully consistent with the earlier survey.

of two major political parties in their country. This is a way to ask people to draw upon their networks of connected concepts and articulate what is retrieved. Only a small percentage said they employed ideological concepts in judging the parties. This doesn't mean, however, that the remaining individuals were devoid of political judgments. About 40 percent of the Americans, British, and Germans linked the parties to social groups. Even more people judged the parties by their organization and political competence. Nearly half of the responses cited specific policy criteria. The broadest and most frequently used linkage—judging parties by the nature of the times—evaluated parties by how well the economy and nation are faring. I calculated a rough approximation of these categories for the 2004 American National Election Study and the 1994 German Media Study, and both show the continuing diversity of party images.[9]

Some researchers remain skeptical of the ability of heuristics to match the standards of rational decision making. Michael Delli Carpini and Scott Keeter (1996), for example, noted that heuristics can sometimes give incorrect guidance and are subject to elite manipulation (also see Kuklinski and Peyton 2007). In contrast, experimental studies are much more positive about the value of heuristics in reaching desired outcomes (Lau and Redlawsk 2006; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). This also depends on the accuracy and visibility of political cues. And some strong cues, such as party identities, may distort judgments. So the debate continues. The reasonable choice perspective argues that people are making pretty good choices—not perfect choices.

Cognitive Mobilization

Even if the public of the 1950s (and earlier) had limited political skills and resources, contemporary publics are different. A process of cognitive mobilization has raised the public's overall level of political sophistication (Dalton 2012; Inglehart 1990). This process has two separate parts: the ability to acquire political information and the ability to process political information.

A generation or two ago, the average citizen had limited access to information. In the past, one could read newspapers or magazines, but this could be demanding, especially for a public with limited education. Particularly in Europe, daily newspapers were of uneven quality and news coverage, and many mass newspapers were little more than scandal sheets. Information also arrived days or even weeks after the actual events. Today, the supply and variety of political news are nearly unlimited.

The expansion of the mass media, especially television, is the clearest example of this change (Norris 2000; Prior 2007). In 1950 television was still a novelty for most Americans and a luxury for most Europeans. Television sets were in only half of American homes, in fewer than 10 percent of homes in Great Britain and France, and in fewer than 5 percent of those in West Germany. The expansion of television ownership over the next two decades produced a growing reliance on television as a source of political information. In the 1952 U.S. elections, 51 percent of the electorate used television news as an information source. By 1960, the number had risen to

a plateau of about 90 percent. By the 1970s, the British, French, and West German public had also reached the 90 percent level.

As television viewership increased, so too did the amount of political information provided by the medium. The now-standard American nightly half-hour national news program began only in 1963. Today, news reporting is instantaneous and done on a worldwide scale. Most Americans have access to news on a 24/7 basis: CNN, FOX, MSNBC, C-SPAN, and other cable channels create a rich media environment. Markus Prior (2007) shows that the expansion of media choice has raised the total consumption of political information, but has also increased the inequality in political information between the most and least interested. Those who are interested can find 24-hour news; those who aren't interested watch *The Big Bang Theory* reruns during the news hour.

In addition to information from television, many people read newspapers and magazines, hear news on the radio, use online sources, or learn about politics from their friends. Although many political scientists are critical of "soft news" programs such as talk shows, these programs also can be valuable sources of information (Baum and Jamison 2005). Equally dramatic and important is the rise of the Internet as an information source. Especially for younger citizens, this has become a prime news source. People have access to an array of information that would have been unimaginable a generation ago, which should improve political awareness.

Table 2.2 illustrates the use of various information sources to learn about current events.[10] As many other studies have shown, television news is the most heavily

Table 2.2 Information Sources

Television remains the most common information source, but Internet use is increasing especially in the United States.

Information Source	United States	Great Britain	France	Germany
Television/radio news	87	93	95	96
TV/radio in-depth reports	62	63	67	66
Friends and colleagues	82	83	77	87
Internet	67	49	37	48
Newspapers	64	72	62	85
Magazines	44	48	48	51
Books	32	42	33	37

Source: World Values Survey (2006–08). The question asked about weekly use separately for each information source; the figure presents the percentage who have used each source.

used source of information—cited by about 90 percent of the public in each of the four nations. The second most commonly used information source is conversation with friends and colleagues. People are social animals, and we search out information from our friends, which is a potential check on our own biases. While other mass media sources—newspapers and printed magazines—are falling in circulation, there is a remarkable increase in the use of the Internet as an information source. The ANES found that about 60 percent of Americans said they frequently got election news on the Internet during the 2016 campaign, and this increases to 75 percent among those under age 30.

Political scientists are divided on whether the expansion of television (and now the Internet and social media) as an information source is a boon or a curse for the democratic process (for example, Prior 2007). Some experts argue that television tends to trivialize information, emphasizing entertainment and drama over substance and creating a negative climate of opinion. The Internet is awash with unedited misinformation, fake news, and mischief bots, as well as a wealth of reliable information. Other researchers have an idyllic image of a former age and lament the decrease in newspaper readers, especially among the young.

Some of these concerns are well founded. I believe, however, that the benefits of the new media age outweigh the limits. Television can create a better sense of the political process by allowing all of us to watch legislative deliberations, to see candidates as they campaign, and to experience history first hand. Observing an important parliamentary debate on television or watching the presidential inauguration live puts citizens in direct contact with their government and gives them a better understanding of how democracy works. Television, the Internet, and other modern information sources have great positive and negative potential, and the objective of democratic polities should be to maximize the positive benefits and minimize the negatives.

A provocative sign of the changing information climate comes from a study of opinion holding on foreign policy matters. Matthew Baum (2003) found more public attentiveness toward the 1991 Persian Gulf War than for either Vietnam or Korea at a similar stage of these conflicts. Many people learned about politics from traditional sources, such as newspapers and network television news, but others learned from "soft news" programs, from the Internet, from their friends, or other sources. This is the new information age in which we live.

In addition to the media or friendship networks, a good deal of politically relevant information is available from our daily life experiences. Governments now have a large role in society, and how well or poorly they perform provides important political information. For example, if the economy is doing well, voters are apt to support the incumbents. When a commuter notes that highways are deteriorating (or being improved) or parents note improvements (or deterioration) in their children's schools, these are significant political facts. We live in an information-rich environment, and politically relevant information is easily available.

Equally important, the expansion of information sources has been paralleled by the public's greater ability to process political information. A process of *cognitive*

mobilization means that more people now have the resources and skills necessary to deal with the complexities of politics and to reach their own political decisions. The most visible change in political skills is the level of education. Advanced industrial societies require a more educated and technically sophisticated electorate, and modern affluence has expanded educational opportunities (see chapter 1). Consequently, the change in educational level from the 1950s to today is amazing. In 1952, nearly two-thirds of Americans had less than a high school diploma, and only a tenth had some college education. In 2016, roughly two-thirds have some college education. Parallel changes are transforming European publics. In postwar West Germany, the number of people with only primary schooling exceeded those with a secondary school diploma (*Mittlere Reife*) by about five to one. Today, the number of better educated Germans is twice as large as the lesser educated.

A doubling of the public's educational level may not double the level of political sophistication, but some increase should occur. Research shows that education is linked to a person's level of political knowledge, interest, and sophistication (Nie, Junn, and Stehlik-Barry 1996; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991). In the long history of democracies, contemporary electorates are clearly the most educated with the greatest access to political information, which should contribute toward making a more sophisticated electorate and a new style of citizen politics.

Even more provocatively, social scientists have found that the average citizen's IQ has risen steadily over the past century in virtually all nations where long-term data are available (Flynn 2007; Pinker 2011, 650–60). The average American in 2010 had an IQ that was 18 points higher than that of the average American in 1950! In other terms, the average American in 2010 has an IQ that would have placed them in the 85th percentile in 1950. This rise is due to many factors, such as improving diets and health, but a major factor has been the expansion of education and the framework for thinking about the world.

Another related societal change involves the incorporation of a wider public. In the 1950s, many women were at the borders of politics, by choice or social norms (France even delayed enfranchisement of women until 1945). Public opinion surveys in the 1950s found that women often referred interviewers to their husbands or expressed less interest in politics (Converse 2007, 311–12). This has changed dramatically over time, with women becoming more politically engaged and often voting at higher rates than men. In the United States, the incorporation of African Americans into politics and society was equally transformative for these citizens. And it is hard to understand how excluding these voices in earlier periods would have improved democracy, which is what the epistocracy advocates would imply.

What are the consequences of these broad trends? There are often media claims that people are dropping out of politics based on declining turnout rates (chapter 3). However, long-term trends in cognitive mobilization mean that political interest has actually increased in the four core nations over the past half-century (see figure 2.3).[11] Campaign interest may vary from election to election but has trended upward in the United States. General political interest has grown most steadily in the Federal Republic of Germany, partly because of cognitive

Figure 2.3   Political Interest
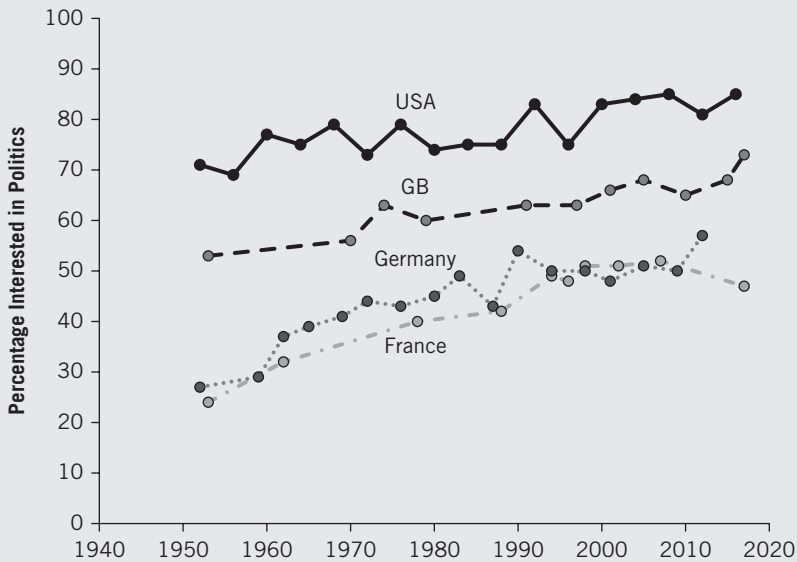
Sources: United States, 1952–2016, American National Election Studies; Great Britain, 1953, Gallup (1976a), 1963–79, British Election Studies, 1991–2017, British Social Attitudes Survey; West Germany, 1952–2012, surveys of the Institut für Demoskopie, Allensbach; France, 1953 and 1978, Charlot (1980), 1962, Gallup (1976b), 1988–2017, French Election Studies.

mobilization and partly because of the nation's resocialization to democracy. People in Britain, France, and most Western democracies now follow politics more closely than they did in the past (Vassallo 2010, 38–42). Philip Converse (1972, 1990) wrote that political attention is a more important indicator of the public's political skills than education. So these data show that contemporary publics are generally more engaged than earlier generations.

The Wisdom of Democratic Choice

Are pretty good choices enough for democracy to be successful? We should be skeptical about setting our democratic expectations too low. Fortunately, other features of democracy tend to lessen the potential problem of making only reasonable choices.

Although skeptics might cite an individual election result as an example of the failure of mass publics, democracy is an ongoing process. Sometimes electorates do make poor choices or make decisions based on what turned out to be mistaken impressions. But all human activity is subject to this imperfection. One of

the counterbalancing forces in a democracy is that decisions aren't permanent. If a politician doesn't perform, he or she can be voted out at the next election. If parties demonstrate that they aren't trustworthy to follow their election promises, their support may fade in future elections. Democracy is like a pendulum. When the government gets too far away from the balance of public opinion—either to the Left or the Right—democracy provides a process to reverse course and seek a new balance.

Indeed, experimental research shows that repeated experience playing a game improves the decisions that individuals make and increases the reliance on heuristics (Lupia and McCubbins 1998; Lau and Redlawsk 2006, 242–44). Democracy succeeds not because it doesn't make mistakes, but because it is a dynamic system that has the ability to correct mistakes. Some might even say that voters display a greater ability to make such retrospective judgments and change their vote choices than do elected politicians who hold their views more persistently even in the face of a changing political context.

Perhaps even more important, elections are a *collective decision* of the entire electorate, and we should judge democracy by its collective outcomes rather than the individual choices that make up these outcomes. The collective decisions of elections are often better than the individual judgments of any single individual because they cumulate the information and the knowledge of the whole community. Some voters might be biased in one direction, and some in the opposite direction; some evaluate one political issue, and others use completely different criteria. When cumulated together, however, the total information brought to the collective decision improves the outcome over any single individual. *The Wisdom of Crowds* (Surowiecki 2004) presents fascinating examples of how collective decisions can be better than those of the individuals who contributed to the decision—ranging from guesses about how many jelly beans are in a jar to who should be president.

Similarly, studies demonstrate a close fit between the collective preferences of the public and subsequent changes in public policy (see chapter 11 in this book). Collective decision making through elections is another explanation for why democracies can be effective even when some people have limited information and engagement.

POLITICS AND THE PUBLIC

This chapter began by asking what democracy expects of its citizens and whether contemporary publics meet these expectations. Political theorists and democratic elitists set very high expectations: people should be fully informed in order to make rationally calculated political decisions. Some of the analysts of the public's abilities remain skeptical today. Democratic electorates will never meet these theoretical ideals, which leads to claims that this shortfall undermines the democratic process. Few human beings can match these lofty expectations, even among political science professors!

But democracy has endured for more than two centuries, and democratization waves have spread across the world in successive waves. It therefore makes little sense to argue that democracy requires a theoretical ideal that is never met. This conclusion doesn't mean we have given up on democratic publics by lowering our expectations. Instead, it recognizes that people bring their life experiences and knowledge to their political decisions, but in different ways than we initially presumed. Even Thomas Jefferson, who was a sophisticated political thinker, valued the basic abilities of the common citizen: "State a moral case to a ploughman and a professor. The former will decide it as well and often better than the latter because he has not been led astray by artificial rules."[12] If Jefferson thought a ploughman could make decisions as well as a professor, then perhaps democracy isn't at risk (a good topic to debate with a professor).[13]

Think of this problem in personal terms. When you buy a new computer or a flat panel television, or make a political decision, you seldom have the full information of an expert in electronics or politics. In my class, I ask students to think about how they decide on which TV to buy. Only a few claim to read *Consumer Reports* or other expert reviews. Most ask a knowledgeable friend who knows about TVs or computers, or the salesperson in the store. But even experts will disagree on which is the best computer, TV, or candidate. Some students have had a positive experience with a brand, and continue to buy from that company. Others just like the look of a certain product. These people are making reasonable choices, and they walk out of *Best Buy* happy with their new TV. If they are dissatisfied, they can hopefully exchange the TV for another model. Who runs the government is more important than a new television, but some of the same processes are involved in decision making. Most of us find a way to balance the costs and benefits of decision making to yield a reasonable choice based on our needs.

How do people make reasonable choices when it comes to politics? This chapter maintains that people can rely on various methods to make their decisions. Many people focus their attention on a few issues of particular interest rather than trying to master all the issues. The electorate, therefore, is composed of overlapping issue publics, each judging government action on different policies.

The sources of information and the bases of evaluation also vary within the public. Some citizens, but only a minority of them, judge politics by a broad ideological framework. More people use political cues, such as social groups or party attachments, to guide their behavior. By limiting their issue interests and relying on information shortcuts, the average voter can balance the costs and benefits of political involvement and still make reasonable political decisions. Perhaps the best description comes from Jon Krosnick (1990, 82), who argues that people are inevitably "cognitive misers" who find shortcuts or heuristics to make satisficing political choices rather than seeking a complete array of relevant information.

In addition, several studies show the diversity of decision-making processes within the public. Cognitively mobilized individuals more often use ideological criteria or issue positions in making political choices; the less educated more

often use group references or other political cues (Sniderman et al. 1991; Dalton 2012). In both cases, the decisions may broadly reflect the individuals' interests. Similarly, Arthur Lupia (1994) found that a small attentive public was well informed on ballot initiatives in California and made choices matching their expressed interests. In addition, many other voters used group cues—such as which proposals were supported by Ralph Nader and which by the insurance industry—that also led to appropriate voting choices. This is pluralistic decision making in practice, and a diversity of perspectives needs to be represented as part of the democratic process.

This pluralistic model has several implications for our study of public opinion. We should not interpret unstable or inconsistent issue opinions as evidence that voters lack any attitudes. Survey questions are imprecise, the public's issue interests are specialized, and a complex mix of beliefs may be related to a single issue. Everyone isn't interested in all issues, and we should realize this as natural rather than a fault of voters.

We also should be sensitive to the diversity and complexity of decision-making processes. Simple models of political behavior that assume a homogeneous electorate may be theoretically elegant and empirically parsimonious—yet also unrealistic. Recognizing that people function based on diverse criteria and motivations, we should try to model this diversity, instead of adopting overly generalized theories of citizen politics that treat everyone as the same.

Finally, we must not underestimate the potential for change. As this chapter documents, citizens of the four core nations have fundamentally changed during the postwar period. Public opinion reflects a dynamic process, and we should avoid static views of an unchanging (or unchangeable) public.

These points do not mean that we should overestimate the sophistication of the citizenry. At times the public holds ill-advised or ill-informed opinions, and some citizens will remain ignorant of all political matters. Lots of political elites hold ill-advised and even ill-informed opinions. Such is the imperfect nature of all human behavior. And when political elites consciously mislead the public to pursue their own self-interest, this presents an even greater threat to the democratic process based on cues and references groups. This became more apparent when some of the candidates in recent elections across Western democracies seem more like Jordan Belfort from *The Wolf of Wall Street* than Jefferson Smith in the classic movie *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. The potential problems of mediated reasoning always exist when relying on political cues to guide choices. However, when voters make a poor decision, or conditions change, they can make new democratic choices at the next election. That is democracy's ultimate strength.

The ultimate question, then, isn't whether the public meets the maximum ideological standards of classic democratic theory, but whether the public has a sufficient basis for reasonable political action. Phrased in these terms, and based on the evidence presented in this chapter in this and earlier editions, I'm optimistic about the persisting political abilities of contemporary publics.

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NOTES

1. "We know Bart, but Homer is Greek to us," *Los Angeles Times*, August 15, 2006, A14.
2. There were, of course, dissenting voices that were highly critical of the average citizen, claiming people fell far short of the theoretical ideal.
3. For example, a candidate in the 2006 Texas gubernatorial election pointed out that the Texas legislature once unanimously passed a motion honoring the Boston strangler. The legislator sponsored the bill to demonstrate that his colleagues voted on bills without reading them. For other examples of elite inconsistencies, see Arnold (1990).
4. Bovens and Wille (2017, ch. 8) summarize an intriguing array of evidence that questions whether educated citizens and elites make better decisions than the less-educated.
5. Critics of the public's level of knowledge often ignore parallel findings among elite groups. For example, Michael Zimmerman (1990, 1991) found that newspaper editors and elected politicians displayed limited knowledge about historical and scientific facts.
6. To the surprise of some political science professors, politics is only one part of people's lives. When the 2006–08 World Values Survey asked Americans what was very important in their lives, politics came at the end of the list: family (95 percent), friends (60 percent), religion (47 percent), leisure (38 percent), work (33 percent), and politics (16 percent). Similarly, politics was mentioned by 12 percent of the French, 10 percent of the Germans, and 9 percent of the British.