The Paradox of Mass Politics

Knowledge and Opinion in the American Electorate

W. Russell Neuman
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Introduction

It is a central premise of democratic practice that the citizenry must be both vigilant and vocal about issues which affect them if the system is to work as intended. How much attention do typical citizens pay to the political world around them? Certainly almost every adult follows issues of war and peace, major economic crises, and presidential elections. But what about some of the more complex and remote issues of economic and international policy?

This is a critical question in the study of mass politics and, as it turns out, one that is far from being resolved. Take, for example, the case of two associates of mine who found themselves on a panel at a recent conference of the American Political Science Association. After the usual polite preliminaries, a pointed disagreement emerged between them. Both men are established scholars and shrewd analysts of the American political scene, and each was amazed at the wrong-headedness of the other. How could a thoughtful student of American politics study these issues so long and yet get it so wrong? I was particularly intrigued by each scholar’s version of the encounter as presented to me later, because the issues raised go to the heart of what politics is and how it ought to be studied. The two versions express a very different sense of public opinion and how the political influence process works. These differences define a paradox.

The first scholar argued: “The central fact of American politics is the behavior of the political elite. Washington is everything. The vagary of election returns, of course, determines which of two competing members of the elite will occupy a seat in Congress for a few years. But who gets nominated and, more important, what gets decided as policy in the day-to-day workings of the political process are determined in smoke-filled rooms and on golf courses. Public opinion is the inarticulate and blurry backdrop for the realities of political life.”

The second scholar responded: “Electoral politics is not the backdrop; it is the essence, the keystone of the political process. The big issues, such as military, economic, and welfare policy, are influenced by the
electorate's opinions. There is a complex dialectic between Washington and the rest of the country. Elections need not be held on a daily basis to make officials in Washington pay attention. Woe to the young elected officials who think they can play politics in Washington without actively courting the opinions, preferences, and whims of the folks back home. It is easy for the power junkies close to the citadel in Washington to forget that the rest of the country is out there. In the final analysis, if a policy is not based on public opinion, it won't survive."

The first position was put forward by Michael Robinson, who teaches politics at Georgetown University. He finds it rather difficult to imagine breakfast without The Washington Post, let alone living outside Washington. He is uneasy about number-crunching survey research. He focuses instead on how specific political issues are perceived by members of the political and journalistic elite and how political interests and influence bear on the decisions made in Washington. Public opinion seems a vague and distant vapor of half-thought-out, half-hearted opinion compared to the broadly articulated views of the political elite of Washington. Theirs are the opinions that matter.

The second position was put forward by Walter Dean Burnham, who teaches American politics at MIT. His professional career has focused on long-term trends in the American electorate, with special attention to the structure of party politics and historical patterns of realignment. He is a walking goldmine of detailed statistical information on American public opinion and voting.

The two perspectives are equally valid, and neither can replace the other. Yet they lead to seemingly incompatible approaches to the study of politics (Kuhn, 1962). The first leads to case studies of political activists, professional journalists, and politicians, designed to find out their view of the fundamental issues of the day and their strategies for political success. The second leads to the study of election returns and public opinion data, in search of trends and the public mandate as an engine of the democratic process.

The two perspectives differ because they focus attention on different ends of a spectacularly complex communications process between publics and elites. It takes a great deal of initiative, energy, perseverance, and financial and institutional support to be "heard" in Washington. Each of these constraints tests the intensity of opinion of a citizen or citizen group. When a staff interviewer persuades a housewife in Iowa, however, to open the screen door and invite the interviewer into the living room, the situation is unique. It has no precedent before the development of survey research. As the interviewer earnestly leans forward and asks the housewife her opinion of national defense policy, she pauses, looks around the room, shrugs her shoulders, but does offer an opinion.

Until public opinion polling and scientific sampling techniques were invented in the 1920s and 1930s, the voice of the people was the voice of those who chose to speak out—those who voted, wrote letters to editors, went to public meetings, wrote to legislators, or hired professional lobbyists to represent their interests in the corridors of power. Of course, most everyone had a vague sense of public opinion at large from occasional contacts with friends and associates. But since individuals tend to associate with people like themselves, such informal measures were (and continue to be) misleading. The pioneers of survey research were thus shocked, when they systematically assessed the political knowledge of the electorate, to find such low levels of interest and information.

The paradox of mass politics is the gap between the expectation of an informed citizenry put forward by democratic theory and the disconcerting reality revealed by systematic survey interviewing. The paradox raises serious questions. How different are the views of those few who actively attempt to influence political decisions on a day-to-day basis from the views of the many who simply monitor the news media half-attentively and occasionally make it to the polls to vote? Do the masses and elites process political information in distinctly different ways? To the extent that there are differences, how do they affect the workings of the democratic process?

These questions are not new. Walter Lippman (Public Opinion, 1922) puzzled over how the public could be expected to understand the complexities of international diplomacy and military strategy during the First World War well enough to offer meaningful guidance to their elected officials. Similarly, Joseph Schumpeter (Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy, 1942) concluded that on most political and economic issues the level of reasoning of the average citizen is primitive, even infantile. The well-educated are no exception. He cited the example of a lawyer who has been professionally trained to evaluate evidence carefully and critically as it is introduced in the courtroom. This same lawyer, when later in the day it comes time to read a political story in the newspaper, reacts instinctively and primitively to the facts and arguments at hand. Simon (Administrative Behavior, 1945) and Downs (An Economic Theory of Democracy, 1957) further developed the theory of how people
make decisions when they have less than full information and limited time and energy to seek it out.

This book takes a fresh look at these issues, paying particular attention to electoral politics. The starting point is the paradox itself. Major election surveys from the period 1948 to 1980 provide the evidence on the character of the average citizen’s political interest and knowledge, cognitive style, political opinions, and awareness of central public issues. Although it is difficult to calibrate the minimum necessary threshold of public knowledge, by most benchmarks the level of public awareness is disturbingly low. Yet all studies of decision-making in Washington indicate that an articulate voice of attentive public opinion is being heard. Where is this voice coming from?

Four theories have attempted to resolve this paradox. The first theory, which emerged from the early voting studies, emphasized that public opinion is stratified. Although the average citizen may not be terribly well-informed on an issue, there are opinion leaders within the community who are articulate, active, and indeed well-informed. Through complex, multilevel communications process, the issues are discussed and evaluated, and ultimately public views are voiced, usually by means of the opinion-leader stratum.

The second theory, also based on the early voting studies, emphasized the pluralism of public opinion. Each citizen need not be an expert on each issue. There exist issue publics, or groups of concerned citizens who have a special awareness about and expertise in matters which affect them directly. Veterans track veterans’ affairs; businessmen track business regulations. The resolution to the paradox is pluralism.

The third theory, which emerged in the 1970s, concluded that the portrait of the unsophisticated citizen is an artifact of the 1950s, when an unusually quiescent period in American politics. As a result of the polarized politics of the 1960s, characterized by student and urban unrest and the ideological candidacies of Barry Goldwater and, later, George McGovern, a changed American voter emerged. In response to a more intense political environment, the average citizen proved to be more politically concerned, more aware of the issues, and more tuned to ideological disputes.

The fourth and final theory, also from the 1970s, dealt with the technical issues involved in the measurement of ideology, issue voting, and opinion consistency over time. This methodological critique asserted that the portrait of an unsophisticated citizenry is false, the unfortunate result of errors in measurement.

Although each response is plausible and offers a potentially attractive resolution to the paradox of mass politics, each turns out to be fundamentally flawed. The notion of a two-step flow of information back and forth between opinion leaders and the mass public is incomplete and misleading. The pluralism of opinions and interests that exists among citizens does not in fact correspond to a pluralism of political expertise. Nor has the American voter changed, for patterns of knowledge, interest, and awareness established in the 1950s have proven over time to be remarkably consistent. And the basic findings about low citizen interest and sophistication have persisted, despite methodological adjustments and refinements.

The key to the paradox, it turns out, lies in a reformulation of the first theory, the theory of opinion stratification. Most studies of political stratification have inferred this phenomenon from measures of education, participation, or the expression of opinions. In doing so, they risk a tautology. The central issue is the correlation between political knowledge and either opinion or behavior. To analyze that correlation, one must have an independent measure of political knowledge and sophistication, so as not to entangle the argument hopelessly. Such a measure of political sophistication would assess the individual’s interest in political life, knowledge of political institutions, groups, and issues, and conceptual sophistication. This index of political sophistication is here recalculated for each of a series of nine voting studies covering the period 1948–1980.

The theory of political stratification, as well as common sense, would suggest that the more sophisticated members of the citizenry have more numerous, stable, and structured opinions and a more clear-cut ideological position. Surprisingly, the findings derived from the voting studies do not support these hypotheses. The relationship between sophistication and these variables tends to be small or nonexistent. This is a puzzling finding, which represents, in a sense, another paradox within the main paradox. As for the relationship of sophistication to voting and other forms of political participation, the expected strong linkage again turns out to be incomplete and nonlinear. It is not that political sophistication is unrelated to political opinion and behavior. Rather, the linkage is subtle and complex. The theory of political stratification requires a major reformulation.

A central issue concerns the origins of sophistication, or how it is that some citizens become relatively well-informed and involved while others are oblivious to the entire political process. Analysis of the demographic
roots of sophistication reveals a spiral process of the acquisition of political knowledge. This is a gradual process in which interest breeds knowledge which, in turn, breeds further interest and knowledge over time. Related issues concern political learning from the mass media and the linkage between sophistication and political alienation and authoritarianism.

Despite the accumulated results of over thirty years of election surveys, there is a nagging sense that the paradox remains unresolved. The system apparently works quite well despite a generally low level of public interest in and knowledge about the political world. A full resolution to the paradox requires a demonstration that the system does indeed work well, which would lead the book into quite a different direction. But the formulation that, under the circumstances, the system works as well as it does focuses attention on how the system works.

There are three elements to an evolving theory of the impact of sophistication on opinion and behavior. The first focuses on the distribution of political sophistication in the mass electorate. It identifies three distinct styles of political involvement, a theory of three publics. The original notion of stratification developed in the voting studies posited a substantial stratum of opinion leaders, generally the better-educated members of the electorate, and implied a gently sloping distribution from the least to the most sophisticated. Actually, there is a large and undifferentiated middle mass, including the great majority of those who have advanced to a college education or beyond. This large central group, perhaps 75 percent of the population, accounts for a number of the surprisingly weak correlations between knowledge and opinion or behavior. At the top of the sophistication distribution is a distinct but very small group of political activists. Their level of knowledge and cognitive style is much like that of professional politicians, journalists, and political analysts. But their numbers are so small, perhaps a few percent of the population, that they hardly influence the results of a representative national survey. They are articulate and active, however, and their views and concerns make up much of what is heard as “public opinion,” just as they did before survey sampling was invented. At the bottom of the sophistication continuum is a third distinct group of apolitical who seldom pay attention to or participate in public affairs. They constitute about a fifth of the population. The key to both the paradox of mass politics and the theory of three publics is a recognition that the bulk of the population is neither political nor apolitical; it lies in between. Most people can be mobilized to political action, they half-attentively

monitor the flow of political news, but they run for the most part on a psychological automatic pilot. The second and third elements of the theory of political sophistication concern the distinctions between issues and nonissues and between attitudes and nonattitudes. Public opinion has been characterized as a sleeping giant. Most of the time it is passive and unresponsive. But when aroused, it has effects on the polity that are significant and immediate. Government officials and representatives deal with literally hundreds of distinct issues in any given week. And they have some sophisticated knowledge of each issue. They may well have taken a position on many, perhaps most of them. They are also aware that tiny but alert and vocal groups of individuals are concerned about each of these issues. But in the public at large there is awareness or concern about only a few of these issues, perhaps a half-dozen or so that receive prominent attention in the media. The key to the democratic process is the fluidity of the public agenda, the possibility that at any minute what was once the concern of a tiny group of activists may suddenly crystallize the attention of the mass electorate and become a matter about which they do indeed have real opinions and real knowledge. The evolving theory, then, emphasizes public opinion as process, the setting of the public agenda, the process by which nonissues become issues, and, at the individual level, the process by which nonopinions become opinions. Therein lies the key to the paradox.

Each of these conclusions and interpretations is subject to challenge. The line between the active elite and the mass public is not clear-cut. New efforts at the assessment of mass political knowledge may reveal that the pluralism of knowledge and interest extends much farther into the mass electorate than the evidence has so far revealed. These concerns, no doubt, will continue to attract the attention of political scientists.

When Michael Robinson and Walter Dean Burnham met at the podium, each was surprised at the wrong-headedness of the other. Robinson, from his study of Washington politics, was convinced that the balance of power lies in the tiny elite of political influencers. Burnham, from his study of the history of electoral coalitions, was convinced that the balance of power lies where it should, in the electorate at large. Not surprisingly, the answer lies in between.
The Paradox

That is the paradox. Individual voters today seem unable to satisfy the requirements for a democratic system of government outlined by political theorists... It seems remarkable that democracies have survived through the centuries.

Bernard Berelson

Democratic theory has never been terribly explicit about the precise requirements of knowledge and cognitive skill that must be exhibited by each citizen for the system to work as intended. But by most any standard imaginable, the low level of political knowledge and the pervasive inattentiveness of the mass citizenry is a cause for profound concern. It is remarkable that the American democratic system works as well as it does, given the character of the electorate. Public ignorance and apathy seem to be the enduring legacy of twenty-five hundred years of political evolution. This is the paradox of mass politics.

Although the political knowledge of the mass population is a central issue of political theory, it has been studied only indirectly. There are numerous studies of attitudes and voting. Inferences are made about voter rationality from the patterns of agreement on issues between voters and their preferred candidates. Sometimes education or media exposure is used as a proxy measure of political sophistication. But there are few attempts to measure knowledge or understanding. The situation is a little like the discussion of sex in Victorian times. Everybody is interested in the subject. There are many allusions to it. But they are all inexplicit and oblique.

Voting researchers have been reluctant to tackle "the more pessimistic aspects of their data" (Burdick, 1959). Gradually, as the result of inference from fragments of data, the low parameters of political sophistication and interest have come to be accepted as a fundamental given of American electoral behavior: "Surely the most familiar fact to arise from sample surveys in all countries is that popular levels of information about public affairs are, from the point of view of the informed observer, astonishingly low" (Converse, 1975, p. 79). The massive National Election Study series (NES), administered first by the Center for Political Studies at the University of Michigan and now a nation-wide board of researchers, serves as a central database for this research community. The series includes over 2500 items about the personal characteristics, attitudes, and behavior of a representative sample of American citizens. Yet only ten of these items deal directly with political knowledge. Furthermore, the linkage between knowledge and opinion has not been carefully analyzed. Ironically, the issue of mass political sophistication has moved from a puzzling discovery to a familiar cliché without ever being the subject of sustained empirical research.

Assessing the sophistication of the mass citizenry raises five basic questions. The first question focuses on the salience of politics for the typical voter. What does the accumulated data on citizen interest and attentiveness reveal? The answer is not a mystery, as indicated by the heading "Citizen Apathy." The second question addresses the level of factual political knowledge most citizens acquire. This is the core of what is meant here by the term political sophistication. A random collection of political facts is by itself, however, unlikely to serve an individual very well. Facts need to be structured and put in context. Accordingly, the structuring of political thought represents the third question to be addressed. The last two questions involve patterns of political opinion-holding, regarding both the nature of the opinions themselves and their role in the electoral calculus of the typical voter.

Citizen Apathy

Apathy dominates American mass politics. This has probably been true since the time of Alexis de Tocqueville, although in his time, as in ours, one is likely to get a contrary impression as a result of the tiny minority of politically active and outspoken individuals who receive all of the attention. Survey research, however, through random sampling captures the less vocal and more representative citizen and reveals that the public is profoundly uninterested in the political world.
In the 1930s scientific sampling began to reveal the character of the previously silent citizen. The term silent majority might be appropriate were it not generally used as a conservative polemic. The early voting research produced puzzling findings: "An assumption underlying the theory of democracy is that the citizenry has a strong motivation for participation in political life. But it is a curious quality of voting behavior that for large numbers of people motivation is weak if not almost absent... Most voters, organized or unorganized, are not in a position to foresee the distant and indirect consequences for themselves, let alone for society. The ballot is cast, and for most people that is the end of it. If their side is defeated, 'it doesn't really matter.'" (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 306).

Berelson's study documented that two-thirds of the citizenry have only moderate or no interest in politics. The same parameter of interest was found by University of Michigan researchers in the following two elections (Campbell et al., 1960). Such figures are not the result simply of a large number of nonvoters, for 61 percent of active voters describe themselves as only "moderately" or "not at all" interested in politics (p. 31).

The low salience of politics in American life was also noted in research on civil liberties during the McCarthy era. In answer to an open-ended question about problems facing the country at the height of the publicity about McCarthy's accusations, only 2 percent of respondents volunteered any reference to domestic or international Communism. Although a larger number were certainly aware of the issues McCarthy was raising, only one in 50 thought them important enough to mention (Stouffer, 1955). Another study of American opinion revealed that only 5 percent of respondents' fears about the future contain any political content whatsoever, as do only 2 percent of their hopes for the future. Their primary concerns, hopes, and fears focus on concrete elements of their personal lives rather than on the abstractions of politics (Cantril, 1965). Only during times of war, depression, or bizarre episodes such as Watergate does even a sizable majority of the mass public seem to pay much attention to political life.

The level of attention to politics is so low in the mass public that events must be "starkly visible" to have an impact on opinions. There appears to be a distinct threshold of public awareness. As a result, impressions of the political parties derived from the Depression and the Second World War continued to influence opinions through the 1950s, because no new events had sufficient dramatic appeal to break through the apathy barrier of most citizens and stimulate new thinking (Campbell et al., 1960, p. 60). This basic fact of mass politics has taken on the character of a given, an assumed premise of mass political trends. But the fact of political apathy remains as important now as it was when first demonstrated.

Citizen apathy is reflected by the low rates of voter turnout. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, turnout has averaged only 59 percent of eligible voters in presidential election years and only 42 percent in nonpresidential election years (Burnham, 1965). The low point was 1974 when only 38 percent of the voters made it to the polls. In primary elections, which are critical determinants of who will ultimately be elected, turnout stands at levels of only one-half that of regular elections (Rannoy, 1972).

If turnout rates provide meager evidence of voter interest, data on other political activities from the NES provide even less. Twelve percent of the adult population report signing a petition, 5 percent report contributing to a political candidate, 4 percent have sent a letter to a government official, and only 2 percent have demonstrated for a political cause. All in all, the number of politically active citizens is very small, or roughly one in twenty Americans. Even within the narrow stratum of the politically active the primary motive for participation is not a political one. A primary satisfaction of political activists derives from the friendships and collegial activities of political life rather than any abstract political motives (Verba and Nie, 1972).

The early voting studies emphasized a number of factors, particularly the modest educational background of the average voter and the ambiguous connection between political action and personal consequences. One study emphasizing the factor of cognitive limitations concluded that many people find politics "downright confusing" and simply lack the conceptual tools to make sense out of the chaos of day-to-day politics. When those with an impoverished political understanding do participate in politics, they tend to rely on the concrete cue of political party affiliation inherited from their parents. To the extent that psychological

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2. The fact that roughly one in eight Americans reports having signed a petition represents an exaggerated measure of motivated political activity. This is a reflection of the psychology of petition signing. Many people, when approached in a shopping center or on the streets to sign a petition, are more apt to sign than to ask questions or to explain why they have little interest in the issue. Even within the narrow stratum of the politically active, the primary motive for participation is not a political one.
party affiliation substitutes for thinking issues through and evaluating candidates on their own merits, it challenges the basic premises of the electoral system (Campbell et al., 1960).

For many people, politics appears to be a rather threatening enterprise:

While some people may enhance their egos through victory in political argument, there are others who, facing the prospect of revealing factual ignorance or committing gross logical errors, seek to avoid the feeling of defeat, abashment, humiliation, or other discomfort by staying far away from such discussions . . . One woman observing that her husband and in-laws discussed politics, was asked whether she joined in the discussions. "No, since I don't understand too much about politics, I just keep my mouth closed . . . People should know what they are talking about and this takes an education which goes beyond the high school level. I don't think I am capable enough to take an active part (in politics). I just feel that I lack the ability . . . I don't know what would be required of me. My husband and I talk it over, of course, but I don't talk it over in public because I don't know enough. I wish I knew more. Sometimes I'd like to say something." (Rosenberg, 1954, pp. 353–354)

Many other people write politics off as incomprehensible. The NES studies include the agree-disagree item: "Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that a person like me can't really understand what is going on." The question was designed to tap political estrangement and identify those pathologically alienated and marginal citizens who had withdrawn from political life. As it turned out, however, 71 percent of the sample agreed with the item when it was first asked in 1952, and the proportion has since remained remarkably constant. In retrospect, such a collective response seems more reasonable than pathological. In fact, in recent years increasing numbers of voters have become convinced that government officials do not understand a great deal more about the enduring problems facing this nation than they do (Figure 1.1).

Still another factor in public apathy is the belief that it is futile to try to influence political decisions. One group of citizens remarked: "Voting doesn't make much of a difference. What can an individual do about it? He can't really do much . . . My vote will always count, yet one vote one way or another doesn't make much of a difference . . . Well it seems almost useless to do a lot of work for the national group when there are so many other people for it and when you really won't have much to say about what happens anyway. A lot of those people are a lot better than I am and a lot of them have more pull" (Rosenberg, 1954, pp. 355–356). Even when people discuss local politics, they emphasize the futility of trying to affect decisions in a meaningful way. At the national level, the perception that one vote will not make much of a difference is widespread.

This attitude is reinforced by the belief that most of the available candidates offer less than a meaningful choice. On average, one-third of the population freely admit they do not care who wins the presidential election (Figure 1.2). In 1976 that number rose dramatically to 50 percent of the population. Well above two-thirds of the population agree with the statement, "Generally speaking those reelected to Congress in Washington lose touch with the people pretty quickly" (Miller et al., 1975).

Cynicism and withdrawal from politics, although more pronounced in recent years, is not a new and unique phenomena. For a large number
of Americans, voting has largely been defined as a ritualistic and symbolic activity rather than a means to an identifiable political end. Low interest in politics is not the exception or even a recent phenomenon but rather the norm of American political life.

**Low Levels of Public Knowledge**

The inevitable outgrowth of widespread political apathy is a fundamental public ignorance of the central facts of political life. Such levels of public knowledge and awareness do not jibe with the long-standing democratic ideal: “The democratic citizen is expected to be well informed about political affairs. He is supposed to know what the issues are, what their history is, what the relevant facts are, what alternatives are proposed, what the party stands for, what the likely consequences are. By such standards the voter falls short. Even when he has the motivation, he finds it difficult to make decisions on the basis of full information when the subject is relatively simple and approximate; how can he do so when it is complex and remote?” (Berelson et al., 1954, p. 308).

The study of political knowledge, unlike most other dimensions of political sophistication, is unique. Such abstract phenomena as a citizen’s level of ideological awareness or the importance of political issues in voting decisions are difficult to identify precisely and measure meaningfully. But there are domains of basic factual knowledge which, unlike opinions, allow for veridical measurement. When unknowing citizens give vague responses to factual questions, they reveal just as much about themselves as when they give correct answers.

Unfortunately, because the tradition of survey research emphasizes the development and maintenance of rapport with respondents, researchers are reluctant to ask factually oriented knowledge questions for fear of embarrassing interviewees. As a result, direct measurement of political knowledge is rare. Yet the available data show overwhelmingly that even the basic facts of political history, the fundamental structure of political institutions, and current political figures and events escape the cognizance of the great majority of the electorate. Moreover, the media coverage of politics and interpersonal conversations peak at election time. Thus, since most of the studies were conducted at the height of an election campaign, these results may represent a relatively conservative estimate of public ignorance.

The basic fact of political relevance to the voter is the names of political candidates. Simple recognition of the candidates’ names represents the minimum necessary awareness for a functional political life. It is difficult to imagine an individual with a sophisticated sense of a candidate’s policy positions, background, and political style who is unable to identify the candidate’s name. After all, a great deal of political advertising, from bumper stickers and billboards to television spots, does little more than put the candidate’s name in front of the public. Over the past two decades, however, on average 56 percent of the population have been unable to identify any congressional candidate in their district at the height of the congressional campaign. Thus a majority of citizens are unable even to guess at or approximate the names of any congressional candidate, including the incumbent, who in many cases has been
serving the district for many years (Figure 1.3). On the average, only 22 percent are able to name both of the major party candidates in contested races in their district.

Perhaps the Senate presents a fairer test, since congressional districting is complex. A senatorial race puts the full power of the local and regional media at the disposal of the candidates. But again, 56 percent of the populace cannot name either senatorial candidate at the height of the campaign.

It is true that a respondent might forget momentarily or confuse names. Perhaps with some prompting many would ultimately recognize names, faces, and even positions of current candidates. But a candidate's name remains the basic medium of political currency. The fact that a consistent majority cannot recall the names of congressional candidates might well be taken as a benchmark of the mass public's interest in politics.

The findings on public knowledge of basic political facts and concepts are similar (Figure 1.4). Even the most vivid concepts of political life, such as the cold war, are recognized by only a little over half the electorate. Other fundamental concepts of domestic policy, including such basic symbols of policy polarization as the welfare state, are recognized by only one in three citizens; the Bill of Rights is recognized by only one in five. As a rule, the most prominent political terms are understood by about half the population, typical political terms are recognized by about one in three, and the more abstract, complex, or specialized terms are familiar to about one in five.

Unstructured Political Thinking

The low level of public concern and knowledge about political affairs apparently leads to a free-floating jumble of unanchored opinions and perceptions in the political thinking. The public's lack of understanding of fundamental political concepts helps to explain the persistence of apathy and the low level of knowledge in the face of a continuous and
full flow of political information from newspapers, magazines, and the broadcast media. Without anchoring concepts, ideas, and symbols, the events of political life are a confusing array of unconnected facts. One needs a conceptual hook in one’s head on which to hang new information, and a cognitive cubbyhole in which to store, compare, and contrast arguments made at different times on similar issues. Watching politics without understanding the rules of the game is like watching a sporting event without any knowledge of its rules or traditions: it may seem to be a competition of some sort, but there is no way to know who is competing with whom over what. As with sports, large segments of the population have no emotional investment in these ongoing political competitions and manage quite well in life without paying any attention to who is winning or losing.

Interest in politics or the recall of specific facts or figures may well fluctuate from one election to the next in response to the intensity or closeness of the race. And some people may exhibit a fashionable cynicism and argue that they do not follow politics or that none of the candidates is worth much attention. But an understanding of basic political concepts is of prior and fundamental significance to the viability of a mass democracy.

The terms liberalism and conservatism have served for the last century as the fundamental conceptual yardsticks for measuring political life. Most parties, political leaders, policy positions, court decisions, and political arguments can be located along these traditional dimensions. The liberal-conservative continuum in politics corresponds to monetary units in economic analysis. Theory and empirical analysis in economics are strengthened by the precision and clarity of the central variable, money, whether measured in units of dollars or rubles. Theories of supply and demand, taxation, and economic equality all use the same metric for understanding economic processes. In a parallel sense, the liberal-conservative continuum spans the specific issues of politics and serves as its primary, if less precise, unit of analysis. Thus, as the comprehension of economics is seemingly impossible without a concept and metric of price, political life is incomprehensible without some sense of its central continuum.

Yet only one in five citizens are able to define liberalism and conservatism in enough breadth to subsume multiple issues in the full sense of an anchoring concept, and only half of these, or about 10 percent of the sample, offer acceptable definitions (Figure 1.5). This top 10 percent exhibit some sophistication in their response by identifying such things

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percentage of population</th>
<th>No. of voting age citizens (millions)</th>
<th>Definition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Broad and philosophical, a passing grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Incomplete, not quite a passing grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>Limited meaning, tied to single issue, usually in terms of spend-save dimension.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Uncertain, guesswork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>No political content.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.5. Unstructured Political Thinking: Public Understanding of Liberalism and Conservatism. Source: Converse, 1964.

as a posture toward change, government involvement in social problems or private enterprise, and issues of socialism or capitalism. The remainder of those who attempt a definition tend to tie it to a simple and concrete example of a particular issue or to the narrow spend-save dimension. But the more typical group, the other 80 percent, offer much narrower definitions or exhibit considerable confusion (Converse, 1964). Responses from the Bay Area Survey depth interviews (Appendix C) are illustrative:

[What do the terms liberal and conservative mean to you?] “Not too much really. For some reason conservative gets identified with the South—identified with drabby looking clothes vs. more something I would wear, drabby clothes, too, but it is just a different type.”

“Oh, conservative. Liberal and conservative. Liberal and conservative. I hav-
en't given it much thought. I wouldn't know. I don't know what those words mean! Liberal . . . liberal . . . liberal . . . liberal. And conservative. Well, if a person is liberal with their money they squander their money? Does it fall into that same category? If you're conservative you don't squander so much, you save a little, huh?

Although the terms liberal and conservative are appropriately used by journalists and political activists on a daily basis, only one in 40 typical citizens appear to use such terms explicitly and spontaneously in the evaluation of candidates and parties. Most voters apparently evaluate candidates in terms of narrow group self-interest, such as whether a particular candidate favors business or labor, or in terms of the nature of the times, such as whether the economy has improved or worsened or a candidate is likely to bring an extended period of peace (Converse, 1964). Hour-long depth interviews with a representative sample of citizens revealed a generally higher use of abstract concepts, with perhaps one in 20 rather than one in 40 citizens using them spontaneously and explicitly (Appendix B). Other studies have concluded that the 1960s and 1970s brought a much richer political environment and more explicitly ideological appeals by candidates (Nie et al., 1976; Miller et al., 1976). Thus when people are given an extensive opportunity or are stimulated by the political environment, they are somewhat more likely to make use of political abstractions (Table 1.1). Still the behavior of the public changes only in degree, not in character. Thus, even with the most lenient definition of those conceptual yardsticks and the maximal opportunity for their use, only one in four members of the mass population make explicit or implicit use of the notion of liberalism or conservatism to organize their thinking and opinions.

Some research has cited the correlation between identifying oneself as a liberal or conservative and supporting specific liberal or conservative policy positions as evidence of an increased ideological sophistication in the electorate (Miller et al., 1976). But on average, 33 percent of the public are unable to place themselves on a liberal-conservative continuum, and 46 percent conveniently place themselves at the midpoint, so that such correlations derive entirely from the opinion of only one in five respondents, or about what would be expected from the other studies.

Further evidence on political thinking in the mass electorate has emerged from the study of attitudes toward such basic democratic principles as civil liberties and the protection of minority rights—the "rules of the game." The characteristic response to abstract issues of democratic the-

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<th>Table 1.1. Use of Abstract Political Concepts (%)</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level of conceptualization</strong></td>
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<td>Explicit abstract concepts (ideologue)</td>
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<td>Implicit abstract concepts (near-ideologue)</td>
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a. The coding scheme used by Nie et al. is not comparable here, as their categorization of references to policy issues and political parties reflects a generally higher level of sophistication and issue attentiveness and would require a new category between near-ideologue and group interest.

ogy, for example, is superficial, based primarily on an acquiescence to recognized civic maxims (Prothro and Grigg, 1960). This response is more akin to saluting the flag than to a reasoned respect for due process of law. There is 95 to 98 percent agreement on abstract notions such as that public officials should be chosen by a majority vote, citizens should be able to have an equal influence on government, and minorities should be free to criticize majority decisions. Yet four out of five people would limit voting to taxpayers, over 50 percent agree that a legally elected mayor who is a Communist should not be allowed to take office, and one in four, as of the 1950s, would not allow a black to run for office.

Furthermore, half the electorate feel that, "If Congressional committees stuck strictly to the rules and gave every witness his rights, they would never succeed in exposing the many dangerous subversives they have turned up." One in three agrees that, "The true American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it," and "It is all right to get around the law if you don't actually break it." One in four agrees that, "The majority has the right to abolish minorities if it wants to," and "There are times when it almost seems better for
the people to take the law into their own hands rather than wait for the machinery of government to act” (McClosky, 1964). Although there is general agreement on the clichés of democratic practice, the meaning of these abstractions is not entirely clear to large portions of the electorate.

The mass public apparently responds to political stimuli in fundamentally different ways from those of political elites. The generally held belief among elites that the public understands political abstractions is an optical illusion, generated by the fact that the elite stratum is consumed in political conversation with itself and only rarely has occasion to discuss politics with the apolitical mass citizenry. Even then, elite observers are likely to project their own ideological frames of reference on the utterances of the public. The election of Eisenhower in 1952 was interpreted by many as a shift to conservatism, away from Truman’s liberalism. But such an interpretation reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of mass politics, because the public was evaluating the candidates on other and distinctly different criteria. The same mistake was made when the public’s rejection of Carter for Reagan in 1980 was interpreted as a profound collective conversion to conservative ideology (Pomper et al., 1981). It is understandable for politicians and political elites to assume that the same kinds of ideological abstractions which motivate them are shared by their supporters, but in fact “the true motivations and comprehensions of the supporters may have little or nothing to do with the distinct beliefs of the endorsed elite” (Converse, 1964, p. 249).

Pseudo Opinions

The fact is that most people have extremely few political opinions. For an array of ten prominent general political issues that confront the country in any given year, for example, the average citizen is likely to have a strong and consistent preference on perhaps one or two of them and virtually no opinion whatsoever on the rest. Yet when an eager survey research interviewer, after driving a considerable distance, sits down in a respondent’s living room, clipboard in hand, and starts to ask for opinions on ten political issues, most respondents feel obliged to have an opinion, in effect to help the interviewer out. Even when they are admonished that not all citizens have opinions on all issues and are asked if they have thought about an issue enough to develop an opinion, 80 to 90 percent of the population selects an alternative in response to most questions. In effect, opinions are invented on the spot. Many of these new opinions may even be staunchly defended if challenged by the interviewer. But they are pseudo opinions. They are ephemeral and so weakly tied to the political thinking of the respondent that within a few days or weeks the respondent is as likely to give the opposite answer to the same question.

Studies of these phenomena, also known as nonattitudes, have demonstrated that in response to certain items, only one in five people has a stable, nonrandom opinion, although three-quarters of them insist on offering an opinion (Converse, 1964, 1970). In 1956, 1958, and again in 1960, respondents were asked whether or not the federal government should “leave things like electrical power and housing for private businessmen to handle.” They were first asked whether they had an opinion on the matter and, if so, what their opinion was. The reference to direct government involvement in businesses such as power and housing was designed to tap basic beliefs about the role of government in private enterprise, an issue central to the liberalism-conservatism continuum. Thus these opinions should be unlikely to change over time in response to day-to-day events in the political environment. The item had a particularly high proportion of “don’t know” responses (24 percent) and a particularly low correlation over time (a tau beta coefficient of .28). It became a test-case item.

The over-time correlations between 1956 and 1958 and between 1958 and 1960 were identical. So was the correlation between 1956 and 1960, a four-year interval. If meaningful attitude change was under way, one would expect the correlation spanning the entire four years to be lower than either two-year interval.

One interpretation of this intriguing datum is that the correlation was the product of one small group of respondents who had meaningful and consistent opinions on this issue throughout the four years and the random churn of a larger group of respondents with nonattitudes. To test this interpretation, one could examine those respondents who had reversed their opinions between 1956 and 1958. For that group one would expect the correlation between 1958 and 1960 to be near zero. It turns out to be .004. Accordingly, one would expect the remaining respondents who had given consistent answers between 1956 and 1958 to reflect a mix of those with true and consistent attitudes and those with nonattitudes who had simply given the same answer by chance. The 1958–1960 over-time correlation for this group reveals the overall percentage of true attitudes for the item, 18 percent of the total sample.
The Paradox of Mass Politics

The results for the other seven opinion items that were repeated in 1956, 1958, and 1960 were surprisingly similar. The correlation for the random group between the second and the third waves of the panel for these other items rarely exceeded .09. Thus, not only is the power and housing item a critical test with a somewhat abstract referent, but virtually all of the central political issues measured over time vary only in slight degree from that benchmark. Similar findings have been found in more recent studies (Converse and Markus, 1979).

One especially intriguing test of nonattitudes is to ask respondents about nonissues. Anecdotal evidence confirms the enthusiasm of respondents to offer opinions on nonexistent legislative proposals. In one study, 70 percent of the respondents offered an opinion favoring or disapproving a nonexistent Metallic Metals Act (Gill, 1947). More recent and more rigorously conducted studies indicate that the number offering opinions on nonissues is not quite so high.

When respondents were asked their opinion on the repeal of a fictitious Public Affairs Act, 33 percent conjured up a response (Bishop et al., 1980). Respondents were not giving entirely meaningless answers but were drawing on the context of the interview, which included other political items, to interpret the item as a way to express generalized distrust of government authority. Favoring repeal of the nonexistent act, for example, was correlated with an independent measure of interpersonal distrust. When respondents were asked about a real but highly obscure matter before Congress, the 1978 Agricultural Trade Act, 31 percent offered an opinion (Schuman and Presser, 1981). They were also queried on their attitude toward the Monetary Control Bill of 1979, another real but equally obscure matter, and 26 percent offered an opinion. These matters were sufficiently obscure to escape the attention of even a devoted New York Times reader and were virtually unknown to all members of the general sample. Parallel tests were conducted in which respondents were asked explicitly if they had an opinion on these bills. The proportion of respondents offering opinions went down. Nonetheless, 10 percent in the case of the Agricultural Trade Act and 7 percent in the case of the Monetary Control Bill insisted on offering an opinion.

The off-hand remarks to interviewers by some respondents reveal the dynamics of the interview process. The respondents seem to be grasping around in a confusing array of complex political positions for an anchoring point from which to interpret these abstract questions: “Favor—though I really don’t know what it is”; “You caught me on that. I don’t know, but from the sound of it, I favor it.” In response to the question on the Monetary Control Bill, for example, they elaborated their position: “That’s a bill that has to do with controlling inflation” (favor); “The bill has to do with controlling pay raises” (oppose).

The items about the Monetary Control Bill were asked six months later to explore the stabilities of these pseudo opinions over time. Of those respondents expressing an opinion the first time, only 47 percent still had an opinion six months later. Of the group expressing an opinion at both points in time, the responses were not entirely random, for two-thirds gave consistent responses.3

Issueless Politics

Although many citizens are uninterested and have clear-cut opinions on only a few issues, it is critical to the democratic process for the politically active population to evaluate the candidates in terms of those issues on which they do have opinions as they weigh their vote decision. This phenomenon of issue voting is complex and does not permit an unambiguous empirical test. But the research so far raises the strong possibility that electoral decisionmaking for many typical voters represents essentially issueless politics.

One source of evidence is the series of questions about why people vote for or against either presidential candidate or either party which have been asked each election year since 1952 in the National Election Studies. Their open-ended format allows the respondents to articulate any criterion at all, not just those anticipated by the researchers, as a consideration in a voting decision. Most respondents in the 1980 Carter-Reagan campaign, for example, could mention at least one characteristic of the parties or candidates they were considering. Most of the responses, however, referred to clichés about the parties, such as “The Democratic party is for an average guy like me,” or to personal characteristics of the candidates.

Evaluations of the candidates’ policy positions clearly do not dominate the public’s thinking (Table 1.2). About 68 percent of the population can articulate a general issue position of at least one candidate which might influence their vote decision. But only 31 percent can identify an

3. The correlation of the item with itself, measured a half year later, is .29 (tau beta), not too far from the average test-retest correlation of less obscure and more fundamental political attitude items.
issue position for both candidates. These percentages are not dramatically higher for the college educated or the politically active substrata of the population.

Actually most of the responses that are viewed as issue mentions are rather vague references to general policy areas, such as the need for world peace. A typical comment points out the need to do something about taxes or about the Middle East, rather than specifying positions that could guide policymaking. Such comments are nondirective references to general problem areas. A more demanding test of the public’s awareness of issues, in which voters identify an actionable policy position on a unique issue—such as applying wage and price controls to stop inflation, increasing defense spending, decriminalizing marijuana use, or mandating sentencing for repeat offenders—reveals that, on average, only 4 percent of the population can associate at least one such issue with each candidate.

Issue voting represents a critical test for democratic practice: “Commentaries on democracy often assume two basic facts about electoral decision: first, that the public is generally in possession of sufficient information regarding the various policy alternatives of the moment to make a rational choice among them . . . and, second, that the election in fact presents the electorate with recognizable partisan alternatives through which it can express its policy preferences.” But the empirical analyses leave little room for optimism about the outcome: “There is a great deal of uncertainty and confusion in the public mind as to what specific policies the election of one party over the other would imply. Very few of our respondents have shown a sensitive understanding of the positions of the parties on current policy issues. Even among those people who are relatively familiar with the issues presented in our surveys—and our test of familiarity has been an easy one—there is little agreement as to where the two parties stand” (Campbell et al., 1960, pp. 542–543).

The election of 1956 became the central test case. The charisma of Dwight Eisenhower—his sincerity, integrity, likeableness, and reputation as a military leader—overwhelmed questions of policy and political philosophy in public discussion and the electoral calculus. In short, the electoral decision seemed to be based as much on affect as on issues. Further research revealed that the Eisenhower phenomenon was not exceptional (Kagay and Caldeira, 1975; Margolis, 1977). The relative importance of issue positions has been consistent and moderate over three decades. On the average, voters’ comments on why they would vote for one candidate or party over the other mention issues 32 percent of the time. In only one year, 1972, does the mention of issues exceed the mention of personal qualities of the candidates.

There is little hope that the situation will improve as a result of improvements in the campaign process and media coverage, because the critical factor appears to be the cognitive style of the electorate: “In the electorate as a whole the level of attention to politics is so low that what the public is exposed to must be highly visible—even stark—if it is to have an impact on opinion . . . For example, despite a concentration on foreign issues by Mr. Stevenson [in 1952 and 1956] which must have been at least as great as that of any candidate in this country, the public was largely unaware of his position” (Campbell et al., 1960, pp. 60–61).

The actual language used by voters to describe their political thinking further reinforces this perception:

The wife of a worker in a Pittsburgh mattress factory: (personally care which party wins?) “Doesn’t make any difference to me. I am not interested in stuff like that. I don’t listen to nothing; I don’t even read about politics in the paper.” A Minnesota fisherman: (care?) “Not a bit.” (Anything you like about the Democratic party?) “No, there ain’t; don’t believe in politics.” Wife of a Georgia laborer: (care?) “I guess you’d call me not caring since I’ve never voted, wouldn’t you?” . . . Retired California minister: (care?) “I have never regis-
tered or voted because I believe that prayers will do more than votes in keeping this country on the right path.” (Key, 1961, p. 189)

More recent interview protocols reveal the same theme, albeit a new perspective on religion and party politics: “(Anything you don’t like about the Republican party?) ‘Republicans don’t believe in Christ—many do the work of Satan, they lie and steal from the poor.’ (Anything you dislike about President Ford?) ‘It’s not right to give speeches on the White House lawn.’ (Anything you like about Carter?) ‘I like his mother, I like his smile.’ (Anything you like about Carter?) ‘I don’t like any politician, I dislike politics, I am a sports fanatic.’ ”

The quintessential answer of the apolitical voter is that of a California real estate developer who in 1972 voted not for Richard Nixon but against George McGovern. Was it something McGovern had said or a position he had adopted on a particularly salient issue? Actually, McGovern’s staff had run a campaign documentary which preempted a rerun of the “Star Trek” television series. This displacement of “Star Trek” so infuriated the voter, he reported, that his vote for Nixon was unalterably determined at that moment.

If issues are not an important determinant of an electoral outcome, what is? One compelling hypothesis is that political tastes resemble cultural tastes:

For many voters political preferences may be considered analogous to cultural tastes—in music, literature, recreational activities, dress, ethics, speech, social behavior. Consider the parallels between political preferences and general cultural tastes. Both have their origin in ethnic, sectional, class, and family traditions. Both exhibit stability and resistance to change for individuals but flexibility and adjustment over generations for the society as a whole. Both seem to be matters of sentiment and disposition rather than “reasoned references.” While both are responsive to changed conditions and unusual stimuli, they are relatively invulnerable to direct argumentation and vulnerable to indirect social influences. Both are characterized more by faith than by conviction and by wishful expectation rather than careful prediction of consequences. The preference for one party rather than another must be highly similar to their preference for one kind of literature or music rather than another and the choice of the same political party every four years may be parallel to the choice of the same old standards of conduct in new social situations. (Berejson et al., 1954, p. 311)

This is an appropriate analogy for the media age. Popular politics is much like popular music. The elite is indeed sensitive to cycles of popular fads and fancies. Political superstars fade from popular attention as

quickly as they rise. And throughout it all there is a troubling aura of superficiality.

These five related factors—citizen apathy, low levels of political knowledge, unstructured political thought, pseudo opinions, and issueless politics—frame the paradox. There is legitimate controversy on each of these points, but taken together, they present a stark portrait of the typical voter.