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Chapter 10

PATTERNS OF POLITICAL COGNITION **An Exploration of the Public Mind**

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THE TRADITIONAL paradigm for research on mass political behavior focuses on the distribution of political power and influence—most notably the demographic correlates of opinion and political participation. Several classic studies of American voting, for example, follow this paradigm, including those by Berelson et al. (1954) and Campbell et al. (1960, 1966).

The cognitive perspective in the study of political behavior, in contrast, focuses not so much on how the public aligns itself on prominent political questions but rather on how such issues are conceptualized and organized in individuals' minds. Cognitive researchers, for example, are particularly concerned with how an issue might come to be defined as politically salient in the first place or how two mutually contradictory beliefs might both be endorsed enthusiastically by the same individuals. The work of Lasswell (1930), Lane (1962), McCloskey et al., (1960), and Converse (1964) exemplifies this perspective.

The dividing line between traditional public opinion research and the cognitive perspective is not distinct. But perhaps the most critical distinction between the two could be outlined as follows. In the traditional paradigm, opinion is taken as a given and the demographic correlates are defined as problematic. Studies, for example, will focus on what types of people support a particular candidate or issue. In the traditional survey, the don't-know and no-opinion responses fall into residual categories or drop completely from sight. In the cognitive perspective,

however, the opinion itself is seen as problematic. A no-opinion response to a survey question is not seen as measurement error but rather a meaningful response worthy of further attention. In fact, the cognitive analyst may well puzzle over the remarkable fact that the harried housewife and the retired heavy equipment operator actually do have opinions about foreign aid and debt policy. Work by Simon (1957) and Downs (1957) on the practical costs of acquiring and organizing political information, and by Olson (1965) on the trade-offs in deciding to participate actively in political affairs, have influenced this line of scholarship.

Both traditional and cognitive work on public opinion analyze trends, but each does so differently. The former traces trends in the direction of support for well-known policy or a prominent candidate whereas the latter focuses on the processes by which issues and candidates rise to public consciousness in the first place. Thus, the study of agenda-setting, or changes in cognitive structure or underlying political symbolism, tend to reflect the cognitive perspective. Examples of provocative work along these lines might include Downs (1972), Smith (1980), and Gamson and Lasch (1983).

There is a natural complementarity of cross-checking strengths and biases between traditional and cognitive research designs. Cognitive research, especially as it emphasizes depth interviews and the close analysis of the natural language of political discourse, can be used to validate the results of large-scale, closed-ended surveys. The frequently cited (but less often followed) guidelines of Campbell and Fiske's classic article on convergent validity (1959) stress the importance of tempering conclusions from data on attitudes and behavior until confirming results from other measurement approaches have been demonstrated. It is an important lesson.

The focus of this chapter is on the blurred borderline between individual and aggregated opinion. Our highly industrialized and centralized society requires a clear-cut "public opinion," an acknowledged will of the majority. Understandably, the system will not tolerate a collective "don't know" at the time of a critical election. Indeed, most of us have become quite accustomed to well-publicized polls, market indicators, and elections that present a falsely concrete image of the public will for all to observe. Our point, however, is that this public opinion whole is very much more than a simple sum of its parts.

We will rely primarily on two extended examples of cognitive research: one based on individual level cognitions and the other on aggregate cognitive processes. The first is the widely acknowledged trend in American public opinion toward political cynicism and aliena-

tion. An analysis of the variety of styles of political cognition that underlies this trend helps to put the phenomenon in perspective. The second example focuses on the widely researched agenda-setting function of the mass media—"the ability to effect cognitive change among individuals" (McCombs and Shaw, 1972: 1). In this case, the cognitive perspective draws attention to the diversity of the audience for mass communication and the fact that the process of public agenda building varies for different types of issues.

STYLES OF POLITICAL COGNITION: THE CASE OF POLITICAL ALIENATION AND ALLEGIANCE

One of the most central findings of cognitively oriented research on political attitudes is the recognition of the spectacular diversity in individuals' interpretations of the meaning of political issues. Any two strongly-agree responses to the same survey item may well be based on entirely divergent patterns of thought. Take, for example, the issue of political alienation. The percentage of Americans who report that "the government in Washington can be trusted to do what is right" "most of the time" or "always" declined steadily from 76 percent in 1964 to 25 percent in 1980 (Miller, 1983). Few trends in public opinion have been so dramatic, especially concerning such potentially fundamental beliefs about our central political institutions. Political scientists, as a result, hastened to examine the data closely and try to understand the origins of such a dramatic shift of public perceptions. Did this trend represent a significant threat to the viability of the political system? The first researchers to explore these trends drew on the traditional paradigm and concluded that indeed it did. Arthur Miller and his colleagues at the University of Michigan, for example, expressed grave concern (Miller, 1974, Miller et al., 1976). They analyzed indicators of distrust including such statements as "the government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves," and "most of the people running the government don't seem to know what they are doing." They found that agreement with such items was clearly tied to policy dissatisfaction. More important, they argued, it is unlikely that solutions more acceptable to the total population will be found because of an increasing polarization of issue beliefs. It appears to be a problem of policy paralysis. A move to the left or right in an administration's social policy

would significantly further alienate those on the other side of the ideological spectrum, yet both those on the left and on the right are strongly dissatisfied with the status quo. It would appear to be a potentially dangerous catch-22.

Research in the cognitive tradition, however, suggests that Miller may have exaggerated the problem. Jack Citrin, for example, with his colleagues at the University of California, Berkeley conducted an in-depth analysis of political cynicism in the mass electorate. He argues that the apparent cynicism may reflect more of an emerging zeitgeist of antipolitical rhetoric and a fashionable and ritualistic criticism of politicians and political institutions. He notes:

To agree verbally that many people "running the government" are corrupt, incompetent or untrustworthy is like shouting "kill the umpire" at a baseball game. Bloodthirsty rhetoric threatens neither the life expectancy of umpires nor the future of the national pastime [1974: 978].

The key issue to emerge from the Miller-Citrin debate is the cognitive significance of political cynicism. Clearly, more and more Americans from almost every demographic and political stratum have been using a more cynically oriented form of political discourse. But what do these words mean to those who use them?

Other research has indicated that the broad movement of the Index of Political Trust in aggregate is actually a confluence of smaller, more particular shifts of beliefs and attitudes. Hensler, for example, demonstrated the importance of clarifying the distinction between local and national government. Some individuals pay particular attention to local politics while practically ignoring national and international events (Hensler, 1971). So, for some, the phrase "the people running the government" translates without a second thought into the imagery of the mayor and the board of alderman rather than national political institutions. Other methodological analyses revealed that the cynicism items that Miller and the Michigan researchers used reflect a complex multidimensionality (Balch, 1974). Citrin (1975) pointed out the importance of separating out dissatisfaction with current political incumbents from a more fundamental alienation from the political system itself. Such phrases as "the government" and "the current administration" blur together in the minds of many respondents if careful distinctions are not made. Accordingly, Citrin and his associates developed a more systematically oriented index of political alienation-allegiance.

More recently, Miller has found evidence that these political measures are tapping concerns with the health of the economy as well as the

health of the polity (1983). This suggests a point Converse had made somewhat earlier in his studies of political beliefs and cognitive structure. He observed that the cognitive perspective of a substantial stratum of the citizenry leads to a fairly straightforward equation between current economic well-being and "good" politics. He labeled it the "Nature of the Times" perspective (1964).

Furthermore, the expression of political alienation may be a self-conscious rationalization for political inactivity. Thus, some respondents may find the statement that all politicians are untrustworthy as a convenient justification for not voting. Yet for others, increased dissatisfaction may reflect a trend in the opposite direction, that is, a politicization and an increasing sense that political policies affect their own personal well-being. This may well be especially true for women, blacks, and other minorities throughout this period. Perhaps Miller's work would have been strengthened by drawing more heavily on the cognitive tradition, which attempts to sort out these factors (see Lane, 1969; Schwartz, 1973).

Depth interview research demonstrates that an aggregated index of political alienation does indeed mask important differences in how political issues are being conceptualized by the mass polity. In the following transcriptions, taken from depth interviews conducted in California in the early 1970s, respondents with almost identical scores on a survey index of political alienation-allegiance are compared.

These two individuals do not represent particularly extreme cases. They live in adjoining middle-class neighborhoods near Oakland, California, and both are Republicans.

The first man is a retired cabinetmaker and had some high school education. The second is a car salesman; he had some college education. On a series of alienation-allegiance questions the cabinetmaker selected the allegiant response without a single exception, almost as if it were a test in which he proudly identified the "right" answer. His lack of complaints about the political system seems to be more of a reflection of his cognitive style and disinclination to make negative remarks about anything, than any particular appreciation for the American brand of democracy or a satisfaction with social trends or particular policies.

The car salesman, on the other hand, ticks off a number of recent events and even compares the American political system to various brands of European socialism. His allegiance appears to be at least partially grounded in a thoughtful and comprehensive evaluation of political structure and current political policies in the light of his own political beliefs and values. In traditional public opinion research these two individuals would simply be equated as having the same "attitude." But as the transcripts reveal, such measures miss significant differences

in cognitive organization—differences that could prove to be critically important in the ultimate link between attitude and behavior.

The cabinetmaker:

Q: Now let's start by your telling me what things about America today you are well satisfied with.

A: Everything. I'm not dissatisfied with anything! No.

Q: Could you be more specific? Could you give me some examples of things you are satisfied with?

A: Just nothing that I could complain about. So . . . if there's nothing I can complain about why I must be satisfied with everything. I have no bones to pick about anything. Nothing to say.

Q: Is there anything at all about life in America today with which you're not satisfied?

A: No, I'm satisfied with everything in America today. Well, no.

Q: Even little things?

A: Little things—sure.

Q: You're satisfied with little things?

A: Sure. I haven't got a gripe against anything. I'm well satisfied! I'm just well satisfied.

Q: My goodness! That's unusual . . .

A: Yeah. I couldn't . . . can't think of a thing. No. I just get along good with everybody and there's no gripes. Well, if I'd been robbed or had some robberies or things like that I wouldn't be as satisfied with that but I've never been robbed, nobody's bothered me ever so until that time I'll be satisfied—that's all.

Q: What or who do you think is responsible for your satisfaction? Everything being so . . . ?

A: Everything and everybody. I don't know. I just haven't any gripes against nothing.

Q: Would you say that government and the way it operates has something to do with the fact that you're satisfied with life?

A: Well, there's nothing I can do about it—so if it's good, bad or indifferent—I just don't complain about it. I don't complain about the President. I don't complain about anybody.

Q: Is that because you think you have to accept it?

A: Naturally. What can I do about it. There's nothing I can do about it. I'm just a person, you know.

Q: We would like to hear about any complaints you might have.

A: No. I have no complaints. None whatsoever. I've never complained to anybody ever. They might complain to me and I might say, "Well, maybe so." You know. But I wouldn't agree with them but that's their opinion and I just . . . well, I can't say "You're right," because I don't know. So that's the way it goes. And I can't say, "You're wrong," because I don't know.

The car salesman:

Q: First I would like to start with your telling me the things about America that you are well satisfied with.

A: Specific things?

Q: Yes.

A: Now this is always hard to volunteer information.

Q: Think about it.

A: That's right. Think of things that I am dissatisfied with would be next. Well, I am satisfied that in spite of inflation, business is progressing—that we are attempting to . . . a program with the world. That our involvement in Vietnam seems to be coming to an agreeable or acceptable close. Although I rather doubt that this area of the world will become trouble free, but I think that our role is going to be more acceptable to everybody.

Q: Okay. Like you mentioned the world economic situation and monetary problems—who or what do you think is responsible for the fact that they are getting better?

A: Well, I think that the administration that we have today is more concerned—with a responsibility toward working people. The reason is that you have to have a healthy business climate to have a healthy employment. This is prime concern of big business always, and without big business we could not have any healthy working situation. Unless we became a totally socialistic country which hasn't proven to be feasible for other countries on a grand national scale. I am thinking of Sweden in particular. Britain is a combination kind of a medium situation between the two. And we seem to be approaching Britain's status as a socialist government.

Q: But you think it is due to the present administration?

A: No. The present administration is slowing this. I happen to be against involvement in our government. I am against big federal government, and more for anything that can be done on a local level, right down to the city backing it up. I would rather have the county do it than the federal government. The closer it is to the people that are involved—the more concern will be taken with having it—a program which really serves the people, and not serves a lot of bureaucratic procedures.

Q: Is this something that you think about a lot, or . . . ?

A: No, this is just a general philosophy that I have always had.

The depth interview materials demonstrate the dramatic divergence of cognitive styles that, by the nature of survey research, become aggregated and interpreted as the same "public opinion." A different approach to question wording in measuring alienation-allegiance, perhaps one based on specific policy preferences, may well have painted a

different picture of these two respondents. Thus, drawing on Campbell and Fiske's model, one would want to see evidence of increased alienation from a diverse compendium of indicators before concluding that such a trend was, indeed, what it first appeared to be.

There will, no doubt, continue to be a tension between the kinds of insights drawn from the rich data of natural political language in a small, limited sample and the aggregated patterns from larger, systematic surveys, but it should be a constructive tension. Work at the aggregate level can speak to the issue of cognitive styles. Our case in point is research on the agenda-setting function of mass media.

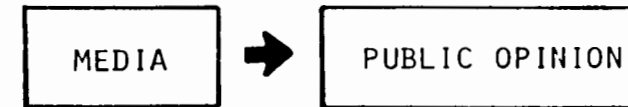
MASS MEDIA AND AGENDA-SETTING

The research reviewed above on individual differences in the character of political alienation runs contrary to a fundamental element of modern political life—the fact that almost everyone gets their political information from the same common sources, the mass media. The original work of McCombs and Shaw (1972) on media agenda-setting focused on the hypothesis that although the media, strictly speaking, may not tell the public what to think, they may influence what the public thinks about—that is, set the public agenda. They interpreted a correlation between the rank order of media coverage of political issues and the corresponding public opinion ranking of the importance of those issues as supporting the agenda-setting hypothesis. Actually, there are four possible patterns that might be evident in a study of agenda-setting as outlined in Figure 10.1. The correlation McCombs and Shaw found could have resulted from some combination of patterns 1, 2, or 3. The question of which pattern is dominant is critical to understanding how political ideas are conceptualized in mass electoral politics.

Initial findings from the Media Agenda Project, in which we are currently involved, provide some surprising answers. The project has integrated a content analysis of media coverage of ten prominent political issues with national public opinion time-series data collected by the Gallup Organization. The public opinion data set consists of references to those issues named in response to the question: "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" The data and technique of analysis are described in more detail in the Appendix.

It was with some irony, then, that we reviewed the time-series data for these ten issues and found evidence of every pattern except consistent

I MEDIA AGENDA SETTING



II PUBLIC OPINION CUES



III INTERACTIVE FEEDBACK



IV INDEPENDENCE - NO RELATIONSHIP



Figure 10.1 Agenda-Setting: Possible Causal Patterns

media agenda-setting. By far, the most dominant pattern was Interactive Feedback. It characterized the causal pattern for the issues of drug abuse, energy, inflation, pollution, race relations, and Watergate. The rise of issue salience in public opinion was consistently ahead of the media in the case of Poverty and Vietnam. For the issues of Crime and Unemployment, issue saliences varied independently in the media and public opinion.

Figure 10.2 presents the over-time curves for media and public attention to energy issues for the period 1972-1980. The energy curves illustrate the characteristic interaction effect between media coverage and public concern. The two are clearly linked; the time-series correlation is .85. But a close analysis of the curves indicates that public opinion lagged behind media through the 1973-1975 period and led the media from 1977 to 1980. There are also several disjunctures indicating that an upsurge in public concern does not always correspond to an equivalent increase in media coverage. The Arab oil embargo of the winter of 1973-1974, on the one hand, was a dramatic, clear-cut and universally perceived crisis. The media led public opinion, but the responses to the crisis by the media and the public were almost identical. The vagaries of gasoline supply; fluctuations in prices and demand for gas, heating, oil and natural gas; and President Carter's energy policy initiatives, on the other hand, were more complex and less clear-cut events. At times, the public seemed to respond more quickly to economic pressures connected to energy costs, or to continue expressing high levels of concern with heating costs after the newness and newsworthiness of the issue had caused it to drop from the pages of the newspaper. The energy crisis is an interesting example because, as Miller et al. (1979) have demonstrated, the public is as likely to respond to real-world cues as to media cues in interpreting the political salience of economic events.

Figure 10.3 demonstrates an interesting case in which public concern runs ahead of media coverage. The war in Vietnam, perhaps the dominant story of the decade, commanded the attention of the media and the concern of the public.¹ Both the media and the public followed the build-up and wind-down of the war, but in both cases the public seemed to move one step ahead of the media. Perhaps the public recognized the global significance of the involvement of American troops in a land war in Asia before the reporters who were concentrating on the details of Vietnamese politics and American military strategy. Perhaps also the public tired of thinking about Vietnam and turned their attention to other matters at the first indication the war was slowly winding to a close. That would explain the 1969-1973 period. Figure 10.3 makes clear, however, that the media were responding to the immediacy of

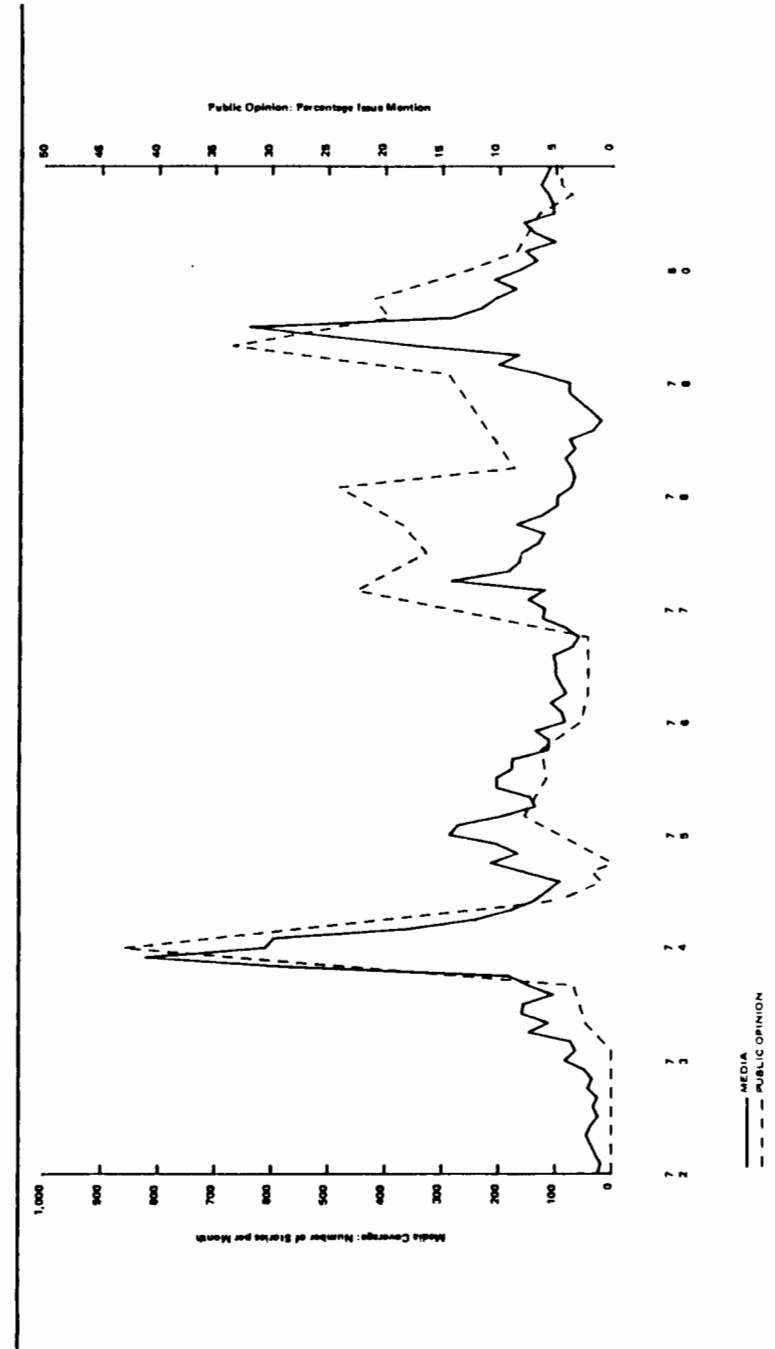


Figure 10.2 Political Salience of the Energy Crisis: Interaction Between Media Coverage and Public Opinion

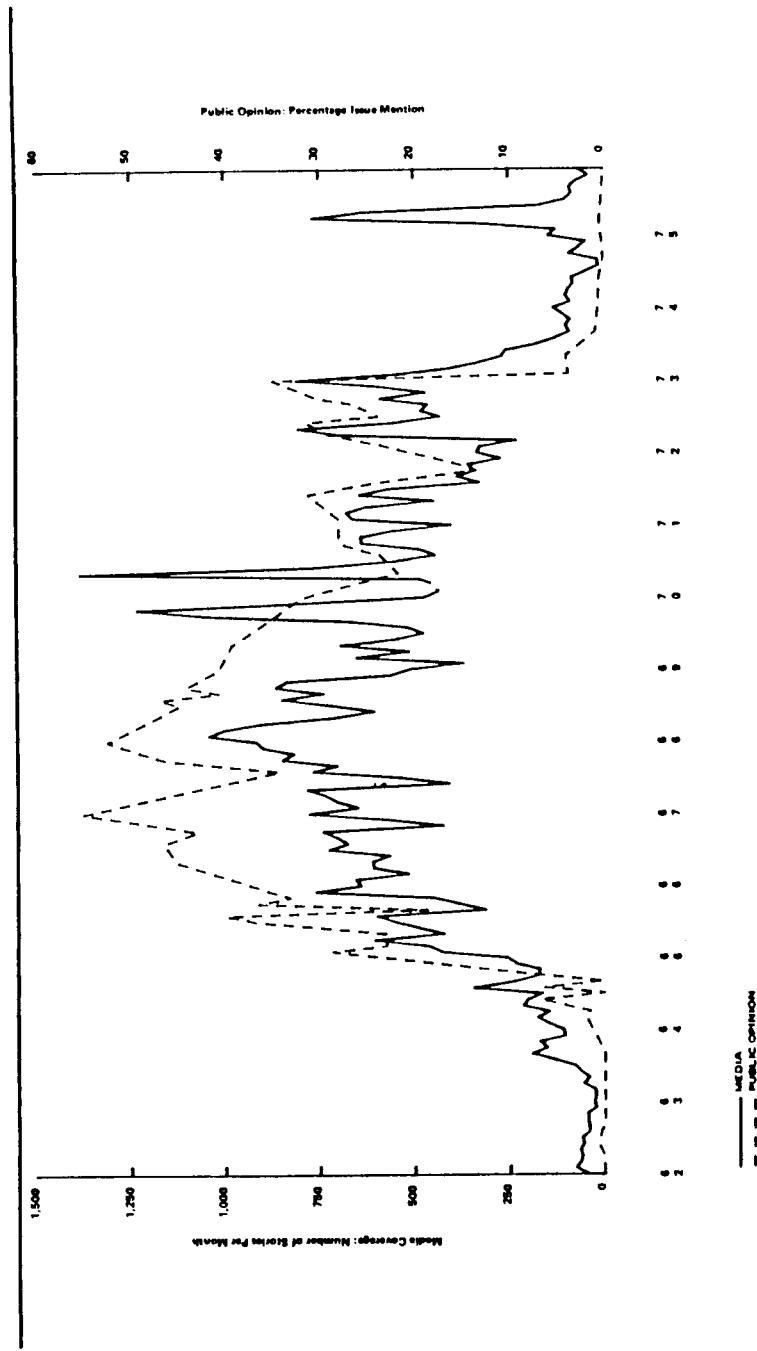


Figure 10.3 Political Salience of Vietnam: Public Opinion Runs Ahead of Media Coverage

individual military, political, and diplomatic events, whereas the public was responding to the broader, aggregate issue of American involvement in Vietnam.

Finally, Figure 10.4 illustrates the fascinating case of media and public attention to unemployment—two statistically independent curves. Clearly, both the media and the public responded to the postwar unemployment crises of World War II in the mid-1940s and Vietnam in the mid-1970s. The character of the response, however, is quite different, especially in the 1970s. During this period, all of the variations in unemployment rates, and the various policy initiatives responding to it, generated quite different patterns for the media and the public.

The data do not demonstrate that the media never play an agenda-setting role. Sometimes they do; quite often they do not. What the data do demonstrate (and why we felt it important to integrate these findings into this discussion of political cognition) is that the public appears to organize its conceptualization of public issues around broadly defined concerns. There is a natural and critically important disjuncture between the way the media organize their news stories and the way average citizens organize their political attitudes. The media immediately respond to policy statements and the latest unemployment figure from the Labor Department. The public moves more slowly and with more inertia and, in most cases, responds only to the broad contours of the policy debate and real-world events. The public is capable of ignoring media coverage or expressing more concern than media coverage might otherwise justify. These examples demonstrate that linkages between media coverage and public opinion over time can be very complex. We find no evidence of the postulated knee-jerk public response to media cues that dominates the agenda-setting literature. If further work by ourselves and others confirms these initial findings, it could lead to a significant reformation of the agenda-setting thesis. It is, we argue, evidence that even research entirely dependent on aggregated data can contribute to our understanding of political cognition.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

The examples on which we have drawn are quite diverse but the central theme is, we hope, nonetheless convergent. Ours is a word of caution rather than disillusionment about the interpretation of public opinion data. The aggregation of individual opinions into what we have

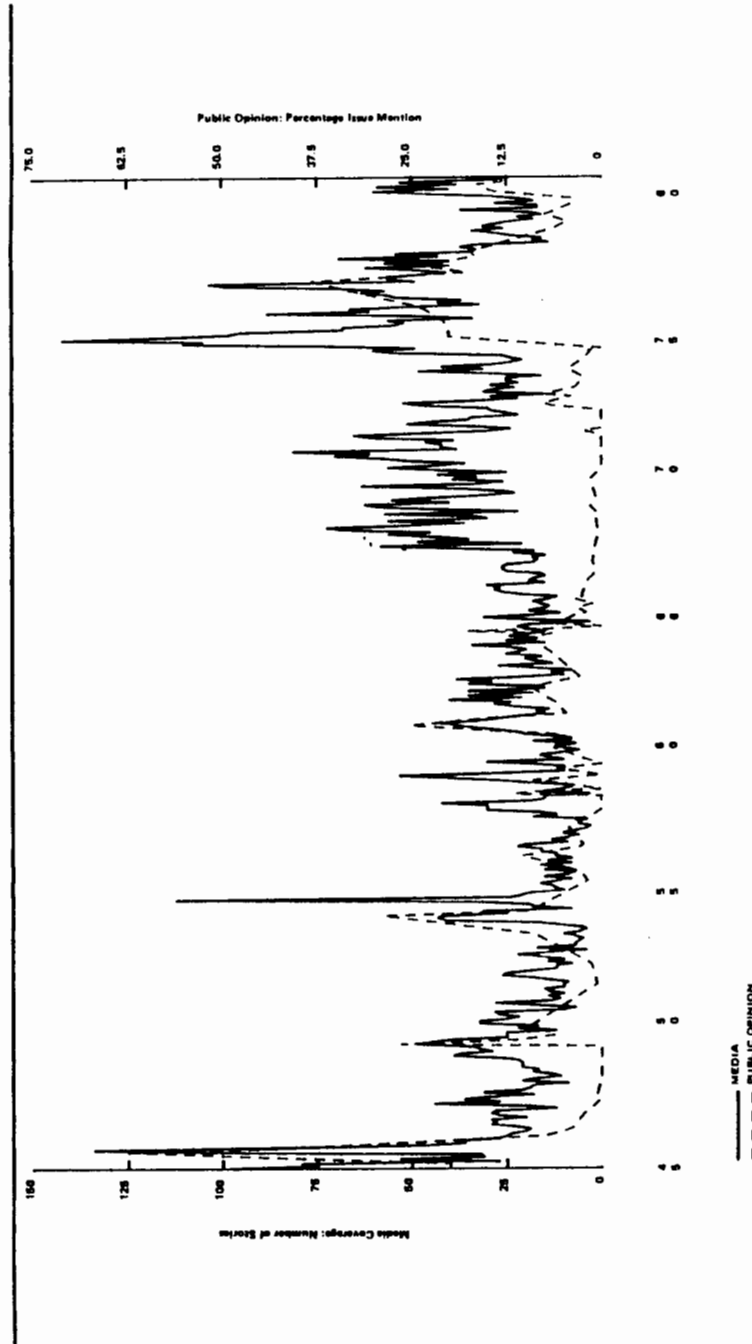


Figure 10.4 Political Salience of Unemployment: No Discernable Causal Linkage

come to call public opinion inevitably leads, in some degree, to the adding of apples and oranges. Any two supporters of a particular policy position might well have entirely divergent rationales for their political beliefs. Individuals, even though they are entirely dependent on the news media for information on foreign events, may nevertheless persist in organizing their conceptions of these events in ways quite different from the journalistic community reporting them.

The tension between individual-level political cognitions and aggregated public opinion does allow some middle ground. We can (to push the analogy to its limit) learn to aggregate the apples with apples and the oranges with oranges. But to do that, we must be able to identify persisting patterns of political cognition, and employ an appropriate array of methodological approaches to study them.

Lippmann's *Public Opinion* was published just as sample surveys were beginning to emerge as a research tool in 1922. It is still frequently read and cited by modern scholars. His sensitivity to the issue of political cognition, especially his imagery of the "world outside and the pictures in our heads" and his discussion of political stereotypes and the role of the press in affecting public opinion remains as provocative as ever. His analysis was not based on surveys but drew on a broad array of clinical, experimental, anecdotal, and historical materials and an informal content analysis of the media. His diverse methods allowed him to capture a number of the subtleties of linkage between the media and the public mind and, in turn, between public opinion and public policy. The tools of measurement developed since then allow us to be more precise and systematic and that is indeed important. But such precision should not lull us into a false sense of security in having captured a full measure of public opinion. We might keep in mind a central insight of his book—the individual mind processes information in subtle and complex ways and the "public opinion" of the polity as a whole is correspondingly rich, complex, and diverse.

APPENDIX

The time-series data reported here were integrated from four sources: the Gallup Poll for public opinion, the *New York Times Index*, the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature*, and the Vanderbilt Archives index for media issue coverage trends. The data cover the period 1945 to 1980. For the public opinion data, respondents were asked straightforwardly: "What do you think is the most

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