11. Public Opinion and Activity

Courtesy of Northwestern University Publicity Office

PUBLIC opinion is the attitudes or beliefs of people about a political issue. The people concerned need have no organization, need not inhabit the same geographic area, and may have no personal acquaintanceship. The attitudes or beliefs must revolve about an issue; that is, a controversy must exist. For the purposes of this chapter and text, public opinion will be viewed as concerning only those matters that are related to government. Whether an eight-cylinder automobile is superior to a six-cylinder model, or whether Beethoven is preferable to Brahms, are matters of private judgment or of taste, at least until such time as some people appeal to the government to prefer one to the other. Thus, if a public statue of a great

composer is to be erected, preference for Beethoven or for Brahms enters the area of public opinion. A discussion of public opinion demands a treatment of (1) the origins of opinions, (2) the characteristics of opinion in action, and (3) the role of public opinion leaders.

THE ORIGINS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Cultural limits on opinion

Public opinion is founded upon needs that people feel as a result of their background and training. Opinions are only made possible, and are thereafter limited, by the culture in which the individual lives. Men do not have in all places and at all times the same wants or beliefs; rather, the wants and beliefs have stemmed from the culture—the totality of social relationships—in which they have lived. Thus what may be an opinion in one culture may not even exist in another. In the United States, for example, under present social security legislation a widow over sixty-two years of age receives monthly checks from the government provided that her husband was employed in a vocational field covered by this legislative system. Here opinion may differ as to whether or not such a system should exist, and as to how much the widow should receive. Assume that a comparable system of government annuities for widows was organized in a Moslem country, where a man may have more than one wife. Now public opinion could develop over the issue of how the money should be divided among the widows: for example, should each receive an equal portion, or should a kind of seniority principle determine the size of the portions? In the Moslem country, then, heated public debate could arise over an issue that could not even exist in the United States, whose culture forbids the institution of polygamy.

Social forces and opinion formation

Moreover, within the culturally determined limits of opinion, other special forces prescribe the opinions of individuals. Some of these forces are: the family, the neighborhood, the rural or urban nature of the community, the section of the country, vocation, income level, race and ethnic grouping, and religion. Each individual is prepared by most of these forces to look for certain kinds of issues, and to take only certain sides on those kinds of issues when they appear. All persons, consequently, do not have the same interests, nor do they take up the same sides on issues.

As an illustration, one may take the field of the family and opinions related to higher salaries for public school teachers. An individual who has

Top. **Great wheels bear petitions presented to Congress in 1893 for the establishment of a national department of roads.** The right to petition the government is guaranteed by the First Amendment (National Archives).

Bottom. **Northwestern University Students conduct a model United Nations meeting to develop interest in foreign affairs, discuss outstanding international issues, acquire skill in parliamentary procedure, and understand the viewpoints of the many UN nations.** Here Mrs. Edith Sampson is delivering the keynote address to the model General Assembly, January 26, 1955.

no children, who is perhaps himself uneducated, or who has had little education, is likely to pay little attention to the matter of public schools; he may have no opinion about teachers' salaries. A man who has children of school age, who is not sufficiently wealthy to send his children to a private school, whose family owns little if any taxable property, who believes that children should have a good education, and who feels that higher salaries for teachers will assure a good education for his children, will probably adopt the opinion that teachers' salaries should be increased. As a third case, a man whose children are beyond school age, or who has been financially able to send his children to a private school, whose family owns property that would bear the burden of increased school costs, and who feels that there is no need for trying to improve public school education by raising teachers' salaries, will probably be of the opinion that teachers' salaries are high enough.

The Family and Opinion: The family is probably the most important source of opinion for most people. It furnishes most individuals with their first experience in a sort of government, including such principles as authority and obedience, leadership and followership, and the like. Utterances by the parents often make lasting impressions and convictions. Relationships between the individual and his parents, and the individual and his brothers and sisters, may be the chief determinants of his political ideas; a hated and domineering father, for instance, may conduct an individual toward a hatred of all authority, reflected in the political field by a distrust or dislike of political leaders and the government in all its manifestations. Such was the background and resulting behavior, for example, of Giuseppe Zangara, who tried to assassinate President-elect F. D. Roosevelt in 1933.

The family, too, is likely to condition an individual's attitudes toward many other fields. It may relatively or even absolutely determine his choice of an occupation. It is important in establishing his income level. Its environment, the neighborhood in which the home is situated, its location in an urban or rural setting and in a particular region of the country, influence the individual in his opinion regarding these matters. The family establishes the racial and national grouping of the individual, and, especially in the cases of minorities, fixes his attitudes toward his own and other groups. For instance, in her novel *Strange Fruit,* a comparatively objective tale involving interracial conflict in Georgia, Lillian Smith portrays a Negro mother beating her son for having jeered at a white girl, to teach him submission to white people. It can be seen from the scope of its molding effects that the family is the actual origin of a vast body of specific opinion.

The School and Opinion: It is difficult to assess the importance of the school as a source of opinion. Of course, a parochial school will plant in the child the opinions that the parent church itself propagates; and it is likely to urge greater use of public funds for the support of the school. A private, non-sectarian school, since it is designed for children of upper-

income groups, is apt to instill the opinions, attitudes, and values of those groups. Public schools, however, are presumably unbiased. Certainly the schools mirror the culture of their environment, and probably teach few if any opinions that clash violently with the culture.

Exactly what opinions the schools may and do teach are matters of considerable dispute. On the one hand are those holding the traditional view that teachers with rare exceptions are very "conservative" and timid in their political and economic beliefs; these observers insist that any teacher deviating even a trifle from the beliefs of the community is apt to be dismissed on the spot. By contrast, there are those who argue that public school teachers are excessively "liberal" in their opinions, and that they are endeavoring to plant in their students a belief in the need for a state-planned economy. As with many disputes, the truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. Probably many teachers seek little if any change in American society; teachers are recruited primarily from families of the lower-middle income level, a group that tends to adhere to conventional values. By contrast, one faction among the educators, whose influence over the whole public school system is difficult to weigh but which is not preponderating, sees the schools as implements whereby to refashion society.

The Church and Opinion: The degree to which the church or religious body contributes to the formation of public opinion varies greatly from one church to another. Perhaps the greatest religious influence upon modern American public opinion stems from no church body today but from the seventeenth-century Puritans who colonized New England, bringing with them their powerful credo of thrift and profit. It should be remembered that the northern and western regions of the United States were civilized by one of the most benevolent manifestations of cultural imperialism in history, that of Massachusetts and Connecticut. The broadcasting of these Puritan doctrines gave the stimulus for much of the economic expansion of the United States, and furnishes it with a substantial portion of its justification today.

So far as churches of this century are concerned, studies have shown in the case of many large congregations that people tend to join churches containing other people with similar political, economic, and social backgrounds. Hence these churches follow, rather than lead, the opinions of their members. Of course, there are exceptions to this general principle; John D. Rockefeller all his life was associated with the Baptist Church, a body that attracts most of its membership from the lower income groups. Jewish congregations, although made up of individuals as prosperous as the average of well-to-do Protestant groups such as the Presbyterian, also number a greater proportion of people supporting the enactment of laws favoring working people. Certain church bodies lead their members' opinions more than other churches do. The Catholic Church, for example, with its stress on the family, emphasizes the desirability of certain kinds of social legislation.

Media of mass communications

The Press: 1. NEWSPAPERS. Among the various mass communications media associated with the press, that is, newspapers, magazines, and books, newspapers have the widest and most persistent influence upon public opinion. However, it is easy to overestimate the importance of newspapers in the formulation of public opinion; and almost certainly they are not, for a number of reasons, as influential as they were during much of the nineteenth century.

Newspapers reach a vast number of people. In 1956 there were 1,841 daily papers, with a total circulation of 55,837,834. The first figure, however, represents a net decline of nineteen papers by comparison with 1955, and continues a trend of decline that set in about 1910. Many newspapers under the pressure of economic want have merged, to yield such names as *The New York World-Telegram and the New York Sun,* obviously a compound of three once independently-owned papers. There have developed such newspaper chains as the Hearst, Scripps-Howard, Gannett, and Knight groups. However, the largest chain, the Hearst group, in late years has considerably retrenched: for example, in 1956 the last of three Hearst newspapers once published in Chicago was sold; and no American chain approaches the dominance over the American press that the Beaverbrook papers have in England.

Yet there is a trend that is constantly increasing the number of cities in which only one paper is published, so that today there are only about one hundred cities that have more than one paper owned by different interests. Consequently, where a city has but one paper the readers may be given only one side of political events. However, the dangers in the situation have been rather overdrawn; for in many of the smaller, "one-paper" cities it is possible to secure home delivery of a paper from a neighboring metropolis which may maintain a local correspondent who is not affiliated with the local ruling group. Besides, the radio stations, news magazines, and other media bring in comment on the outside world.

Newspaper owners and publishers move in the same circles as the captains of industry, commerce, and finance. Consequently most newspapers tend to reflect the outlook of these circles. It is often charged that newspaper policy is controlled by advertisers, since newspapers obtain 70% of their income from publishing advertisements. However, metropolitan newspapers are larger than most of their advertisers, so that a single advertiser is not likely to have the power to sway the policies expressed by the paper. Even when the papers are not larger, their ready access to public opinion fortifies their position. For example, the withdrawal of advertising from the *Wall Street Journal* by the General Motors Corporation in 1954, for an alleged violation of confidence in publishing information about 1955 models before the information was to be released, stiffened the backs of the publishers. Although it was far more wealthy than the newspaper, the Corporation found it best to resume advertising relations.

In general American newspapers are probably more nearly balanced and

complete than those of any other large country in the world. Newspapers want to carry enough news to please their current readers and to attract new readers; for it is chiefly by amount of circulation that newspapers win advertising. European papers, especially in France, are in the majority owned and operated by political parties or factions. They probably do more to divide the public into separate worlds of discourse than the American press does.

2. MAGAZINES AND BOOKS. Magazines and books, the two chief products of the press apart from newspapers, also play an important role in the formation of public opinion; this role, especially in the case of books, may be indirect. In 1956 there were 7,907 periodicals of all sorts, an increase of 259 over 1955. Only a few of these publications have a large circulation. Traditionally magazines are devoted primarily to literature. However, one significant development in recent years has been the tendency of mass-circulation periodicals such as the *Saturday Evening Post* and *Collier's* to publish in each issue one article or more recounting political, economic, or social matters. There are also at least three large and influential "news magazines": *Time, Newsweek,* and *U.S. News and World Report.* The magazine with the largest circulation in the United States, and perhaps in the world, *Reader's Digest,* includes many articles of political import.

However, periodicals do not directly reach a majority of the population; only one-third of the people, mainly from the upper educational levels, read any magazines. Yet many of these persons, such as newspaper editors and columnists, themselves contribute directly to opinion formation; and others of them are politically active and influential. Furthermore, numerous small periodicals have considerable weight, though their scope is usually narrow, particularly the professional journals such as that of the American Medical Association. Magazines in general are much more forthright about their prejudices than newspapers are; hence a prospective reader, especially one with strong political sensitivities, is apt to be careful in choosing only those publications that coincide editorially with his beliefs.

More than 10,000 different book titles are published annually in the United States; in 1955 the total was 12,589, of which 10,226 were new books and 2,363 new editions. The vast majority of these have little if anything to do with opinion formation, since they are light escapist reading. Moreover, books treating political matters rarely have a large sale. On the surface, then, books would seem to take a small role in fashioning public opinion. However, among those few who do read books may be the most influential persons in the community: as opinion leaders (see the following section) they can give the book an importance completely out of proportion to its sale. Moreover, some magazines, notably the *Reader's Digest* and the *U.S. News and World Report,* publish condensations of books the editors consider important. Such condensations may give the books unexpected and tremendous weight.

Radio and Television: In the past three decades radio and television have assumed an important role in the shaping of public opinion, radio

after World War I and television after World War II. The structure of the radio broadcasting industry is quite different from that of newspaper publishing. In 1956, there were 2,896 AM and 530 FM radio broadcasting stations in the United States, reaching into an estimated forty-seven million homes by means of 125 million receiving sets. A considerable fraction of stations, including almost all of the powerful transmitters, are associated with one of the four great networks: National Broadcasting Company (NBC); Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS); American Broadcasting Company (ABC); and Mutual Broadcasting System (MBS). Station revenues come from the sale of advertising and talent, and amounted to $700 millions in 1955; about 100 educational and other stations are subsidized.

Only a minute portion of radio programs aim deliberately at swaying or even arousing public opinion; this portion includes discussion forums, news announcements and commentaries, and speeches by public officials and other opinion leaders. Speeches, of course, can hardly escape the prejudices of the orator and the group behind him. Simple news announcements are apt to be rather free of bias, for often the announcer does little more than read press service releases. With radio, because of the time factor, the possibility of omitting significant events is even greater than it is in the case of newspapers. News commentators are expected to reveal their slant in their commentaries. Discussion forums frequently present spokesmen for more than one side of the issue under debate, so that public opinion may be stimulated rather than attracted.

Radio in the main is directed at those on the lower educational levels. College-educated people tend to get their daily news from the papers. These differences persist among both men and women, but more women than men get their daily news from the radio. In explanation of these facts, several points require note. Most radio programs are pitched at a "low-level" audience; the news cannot be fully analyzed; radio gives a sense of personal contact; and it continues to play while women are busy around the home.

Television may have ultimately more effect upon public opinion than radio and perhaps more even than newspapers. By 1956 there were 36 million television receivers in the United States. There were 516 television broadcasting stations, with a revenue of $1.2 billions for the preceding year. The financial organization and the programming methods of television are very similar to those of radio, largely, of course, because television comprises an expansion of radio techniques to the visual field. In the past few years it has been shown that television has had a great effect upon public opinion. It has the unique capacity of creating the illusion that the viewer is at the scene of action. Among the most widely seen of all television broadcasts were those of the national party conventions in 1952 and 1956, and of the ensuing presidential campaigns. A sample of the United States population was asked what medium of communication had been the most important in informing them about the 1952 campaign; television took first place in its impact. Not surprisingly, a large part of all campaign funds goes to pay for television programs.

DIMENSIONS OF PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion, like a geometric figure, has dimensions. These dimensions are not susceptible to such precise measurements as those in geometry, and as a result do not provide absolute numerical data as to the "size" of opinion. Yet, the dimensions suggest what may be the relative influence of various opinions. These dimensions include (1) the intensity with which opinions are held, (2) the number of persons or groups holding the opinions, (3) the political power wielded by those holding the opinions, and (4) the shifts that may occur among those holding the opinions.

Intensity

The intensity of a public opinion is based upon how much that opinion matters to the persons holding it. In any controversy, although an equal number of persons may have taken opposite stands on the issue, the persons on one side may be far more concerned than those on the other in having their opinion prevail. Often a large number of persons only moderately concerned with an issue may be counterbalanced by a very small group deeply attached to its opinion. Just how intensely these individuals hold their opinion can be sometimes seen from the precision, clarity, and detail of the arguments with which they endeavor to convince others of their rightness. At other times, intensity of conviction is reflected in sheer vehemence, and a liberal use of crude slogans.

Number of persons or groups

On any given issue there are almost always different numbers of people or groups holding distinct opinions. Number in itself is not decisive in fixing the weight of an opinion; intensity, for example, as noted above can conquer number. At the same time, if a very large number of people become attached to an opinion, that opinion has a better chance of prevailing in a contest with an opinion held by a few people, even if they are closely organized.

One important consequence of an intensely-held conviction may be that those sharing the opinion will create an organization to further their ends, making the opinion the property of a group. Now those holding the opinion have a tremendous advantage since, in politics as in war, a group tightly organized about a conviction can easily dispose of a much larger number of comparatively disinterested and isolated individuals. This is one of the reasons for the frequent success of the Communist Party in dealing with apparently overwhelming majority opposition.

Political power

However intensely people may hold an opinion, and however many persons or groups may hold it, the opinion may come to naught because those behind it have little political power. Political controls in this con-

text include the means that those holding an opinion have for influencing the government, such as political office, wealth, prestige, or management of mass communications media. One of the prime differences between a representative government and a totalitarian regime is that in the representative government almost any opinion has the possibility of winning some audience. An apt illustration of the effect of political control upon the force of opinion lies in federal legislation benefitting industrial workers. For many decades there has been a widely shared opinion that Congress should enact statutes for the welfare of laborers. However, this opinion was generally unheard at the level of the federal government (with important exceptions in Wilson's first term) until 1933. Beginning in that year, however, this opinion carried far greater weight because for the first time it was shared by many politically influential persons in Washington. To take another illustration, one of the reasons why Indian welfare was commonly neglected in American politics was that Indians had no vote, no power, and no organization to present their needs to officials in Washington.

Shifts in public opinion

Whatever may be the strength of an opinion, as measured by its dimensions of intensity, number, and political controls, it is never constant, but always varying. An opinion is continually losing and winning adherents. In the case of the minimum wage law cited above, if the managers of a factory should raise all wages so that none would be below the minimum sought by law, the number of persons behind that opinion would probably be diminished by the withdrawal of some workers at that factory; probably not all the workers would desert the opinion, since opinions are not held solely on the basis of immediate self-interest. Opinions also may be discarded, or at least their intensity may be lessened, in order to advance other causes. For instance, after American involvement in World War II, President Roosevelt urged that "Doctor New Deal" be superseded by "Doctor Win-the-War." Thus the outbreak of the war paved the way for a reconciliation between capital and labor, which had been divided over Roosevelt's domestic undertakings, so that they could unite in the effort to defeat Germany, Italy, and Japan. This sort of procedure is more possible in the case of organized interest groups, in which the leaders may have substantial control over the opinions and actions of the followers.

OPINION LEADERS AND PUBLIC ACTIVITY

Opinion leaders are those individuals who, for any one of many reasons, have over the opinions of others an influence that is above average. Opinion leaders are a minority in the population. One study made in 1946 disclosed how unaware most people are of major political events. A sample of the American people, consisting of 1,292 persons, was interrogated about their awareness regarding five important issues of the time: the Report of the Anglo-American Committee on Palestine; the Acheson-

Lilienthal report on atomic energy; the Paris meeting of the Big Four Ministers; the proposed loan to England being debated in Congress; and the fact that Palestine was then ruled by England. Twelve per cent of the sample had heard of all five issues. Nineteen per cent had heard of four of the issues; seventeen per cent, of three; twenty per cent, of two; eighteen per cent, of one; and fourteen per cent of the sample had heard of none of the issues.[1]

Probably less than half the adult population is aware of half or more of the concrete issues that agitate the nation at a given moment. An even smaller fraction of the population contributes to the public debate on any single issue or group of issues. A demonstration of this came from the 1952 presidential campaign, which evoked more public interest than most, and which, since it was a campaign, probably found more persons using their powers of persuasion than in ordinary months. When a sample of 1,614 American adults were asked by the Survey Research Center, "Did you talk to any people to try to show them why they should vote for one of the parties or candidates?" only twenty-seven per cent answered "Yes."[2] Probably many of these people who answered "Yes" were not even aware that they were engaging in an uncommon activity.

Other studies, aiming at a clearer proof of opinion leadership (as opposed to simple knowledge about issues, or an occasional urging of people to take a certain viewpoint), have revealed an even smaller minority of opinion leaders. For instance, R. K. Merton reported interviews with eighty-five persons in a small Atlantic seaboard city in which respondents were asked to name persons whose opinions influenced them and who were generally sought out for advice regarding personal decisions. Respondents mentioned 1,043 names; but owing to duplications there were but 379 different persons. Of this total, fifty-seven were mentioned four or more times, and a few were mentioned thirty or more times.

In another study of farm operators in four townships in Iowa, Bryce Ryan asked a large sample to name persons to whom they would go for advice on local problems of schools, farm taxes, scarcity of farms, land use, and local roads. Again, many people were named once, and a very few men were named several times. The conclusion is that opinion leaders may influence from a very few to very many other people, and that the highly influential opinion leaders are very few in number. Of course, when opinion leaders "get into the business" of influencing others—as public relations counsels, professors, newspaper publishers, or politicians—they greatly increase their range of influence.

An opinion leader may or may not be an officer in a pressure group. In the case of a pressure group, there is some sort of definite organization or structure within which the leader functions. The opinion leader can, and often tries to, operate within the framework of an organization; but so far

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[1] Hyman, H. H., and P. B. Sheatsley, "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 11 (1947), pp. 412–423.

[2] Campbell *et al.*, *The Voter Decides*, p. 30.

as his role of opinion leader is concerned, he can also address persons to whom he has no formal attachment. If he is an official of a public or private group, some are likely to hearken more closely to him than other people do.

Opinion leaders appear at many levels in society, and in many different vocations. They include, among others: the policy-making officials of the government; party bosses; pressure group chiefs; officers of political research bodies and of reform groups; captains of industry and labor union presidents; directors of mass communications media; members of certain professions, especially those who, like lawyers and teachers, deal closely with the public; and certain types of businessmen, such as building contractors and real estate brokers, who are apt to have economic ties with the government. On the neighborhood level the opinion leader may be an individual on a far more modest plane, such as a perceptive, vocal, and aggressive barber or bartender. Whatever their political, economic, or social standing, opinion leaders are men and women whom other people listen to and from whom they get ideas and convictions. Their activity constitutes an important type of political participation.

However, the influencing of opinion by members of the public is only one kind of activity. Ordinary people cannot only convince others of their point of view, but also can vote, give money to political movements, take part in rallies, ring doorbells for their candidates, be active in associations of many kinds, and do other things. Just as one can conceive of the completely inert citizen who is politically a blank page, so also can one conceive of the highly active citizen who does all of these things and more, without necessarily holding public office.

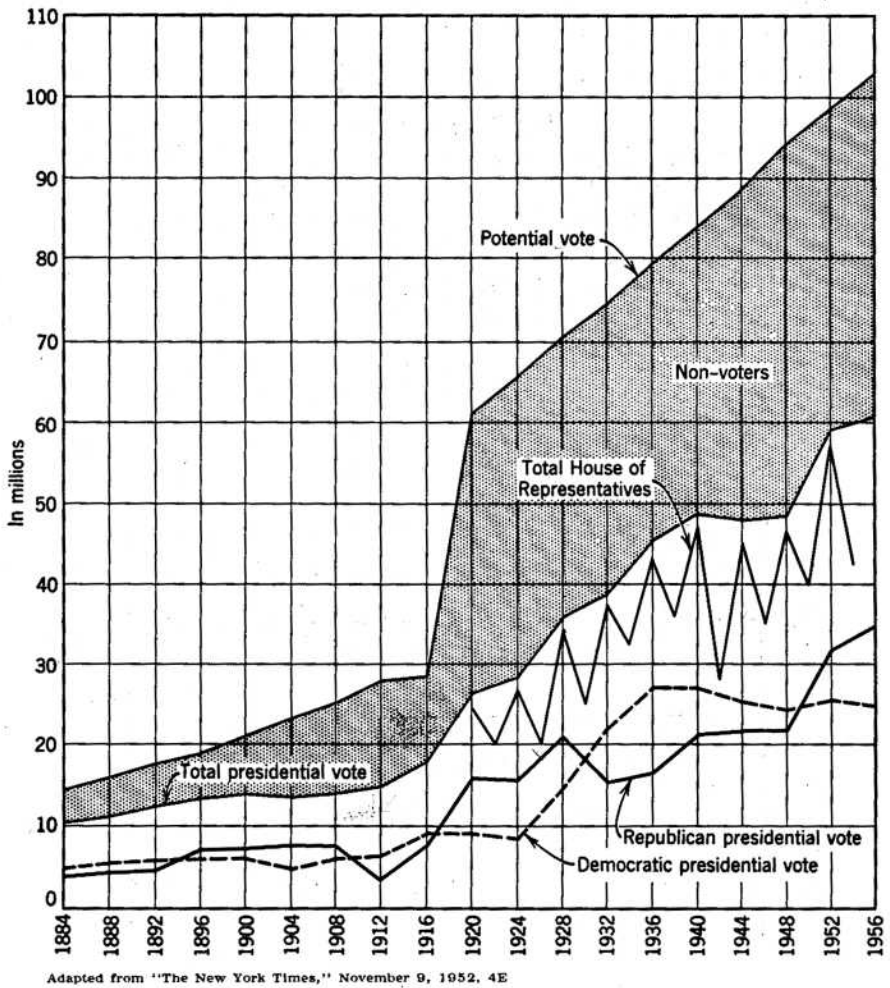
Voting

Voting is perhaps the most obvious and common kind of political activity. However, in the United States at a presidential election, fewer than seventy per cent of the potential voters go to the polls. Indeed, at elections other than those for the presidency, the rate of voting participation may fall far below fifty per cent; sometimes only one voter in three casts a ballot. Americans do not vote in such proportions as the people of western European nations, regardless of the type of election. Figure 21 shows the voting rate in recent years, and Figure 19 pictures the situation in the general elections of 1956.

The Americans who fail to vote fall into certain distinguishable categories. Voting in the southern States, whether or not there is a poll tax, lags far behind voting elsewhere in the country; in fact, when the proportion of American voters outside the southern States is computed, it does not fall far behind the percentages of western Europe. More men than women vote; the sharp rise in the curve of potential voters about the year 1920 shown in Figure 21, which was occasioned by the Nineteenth (Women's Suffrage) Amendment, was not paralleled by a comparable rise in actual voting. Persons with a college education vote more frequently than those without. Managerial employees and office workers vote more

often than farmers and unskilled laborers. A higher proportion of union members than of non-union workers go to the polls, a situation that testifies to the success of unions in getting out the vote. City dwellers vote in greater proportion than country dwellers. More Republicans than Democrats vote, save where the latter are highly organized.

Proposals are sometimes made that steps be taken to increase the proportion of those voting. It is occasionally suggested that States enact compulsory voting laws, imposing a fine upon, or removing a tax exemption from, those who fail to vote. Certain foreign countries, such as Belgium, and even some American States, such as Georgia, have enforced compulsory voting. Neglect, not ignorance, is said to cause non-voting; also, the duty to vote, it is felt, will impel people to study the candidates and issues,



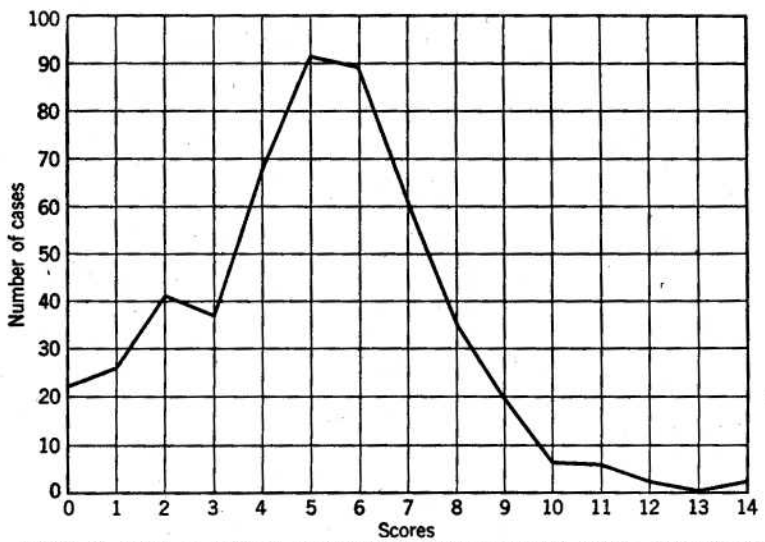
Adapted from "The New York Times," November 9, 1952, 4E

Figure 21. Voting Participation in Presidential Elections (1884–1956) and Midterm Elections (1920–1954). Note the sharp decline in participation in midterm elections of the House of Representatives.

and create a more intelligent public. However, this sort of voting raises some questions. Those who go to the polls today are better-informed about current events than those who do not. Would compelling present-day non-voters to cast ballots add to the "intelligence" of the vote? Furthermore, would compulsory voting be an imposition upon those persons who have scanned the lists of candidates and have concluded that they positively reject all aspirants for office? Also, following the principle that one may attract more flies with sugar than with vinegar, might it not be possible to draw more persons to the polls by reducing the number of elections during the year, shortening the list of offices for which people must vote, and simplifying the election procedure? Finally, the most obvious effect of compulsory voting would be to reward the political party that gets the largest proportion among those who previously have been non-voters; in America, the Democrats would benefit. Is compulsory voting then still desirable, on general principles?

Scoring people's activity

Voting, like urging one's opinions upon others, is again only a simple activity. Some part of the people do much more than talk and vote. They work in different ways in politics. What do they do, and how many do so? The chart in Figure 22 plots the number of American adults who were found during the 1952 presidential campaign at each level of activity, from complete inactivity to high activity. On the next page is the scoring system that was used to give each respondent his or her score. Perhaps the most remarkable feature of the chart is the sudden, sharp decline in political activity upon moving from the modest scores of 5–8 to the higher scores of 9–14. Also, the large number of inactive citizens in the scoring



Analysis by author of materials gathered by the Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, Study 400

Figure 22. Political Activity Scores of Americans, 1952.

HOW AMERICANS WERE SCORED ON POLITICAL ACTIVITY

Possible Points	Area of Activity	Description of Scoring Method
3	Voting	A person scores 1 point if he voted in 1952. He scores 2 additional points if he says he has always or almost always voted. A person scores 1 point if he states that he has sometimes voted in the past. Persons who were under 21 in 1948 were given 1 additional point if they voted in 1952. thus scoring 2 points.
2	Media use	A person scores 1 point if he said he read a lot about the campaign in newspapers or magazines or both. He is given ½ point for reading both not very much. Another point is given for radio or television listening or viewing under the same rules.
1	Persuading others	A person scores 1 point if he answered "yes" to the question: Did you talk to any people and try to show them why they should vote for one of the parties or candidates?
1	Financial contributions	Same for question: Did you give any money or buy tickets or anything to help the campaign for one of the parties or candidates?
1	Attending meetings	Same for question: Did you go to any political gatherings, meetings, dinners, or affairs of that nature?
1	Party work	Same for question: Did you do any other work for one of the parties or candidates?
1	Political club member	Same for question: Do you belong to any political club or organization?
2	Member of formal organization	Four or more memberships score 2 points, one to three score 1 point.
1	Member of informal club or group	Four or more memberships score 1 point, one to three score ½ point.
2	Active in formal organization	Being active in three or more scores 2 points, active in one or two scores 1 point.
1	Active in informal organization or group	Being active in four or more scores 1 point, active in one to three scores ½ point.
16	Total possible score	(In totalling individual scores, wherever a person scored a fractional sum, the half-points were rounded off alternately whenever they occurred to the next higher and next lower number.)

range below 5 is worthy of note. The picture of American public life suggested by the chart shows the "average man" to be far from a "model citizen" as painted by a Fourth of July orator. The "examination" was not meant to be difficult to pass, but only a small minority of citizens made high grades. About 14% of the 505 respondents scored eight points or more. The "active" score of 10 or more was achieved by only three per cent of the number.

Referring back to Figure 5, in Chapter 2, the American public appears to fit diagram (*C*) better than it does any other of the diagrams. The *active* public is small, numbering about one out of every thirty-five adult Americans. They have been called sometimes the *politists*, that is, people who are especially occupied with politics. Many of the contacts of the government with the whole public are filtered through the politists. Much of the control and influence exerted upon the most active and powerful sector of the public—the political leaders of the government—emanate from the politists. All the one hundred million adults of the United States might conceivably be active in politics; but the fact is that the active public is made up of no more than three million Americans.

Chapter 18 will describe the top leaders of the nation in some detail. As might perhaps be expected, the whole body of politists, or active citizens, has traits that place it midway between the inactive citizens and the highly influential citizens. The politists, in comparison with the inactive citizens, contain a greater proportion of well-educated, upper-income, white persons of skilled and professional occupations living in urban centers. A study, by Professors Ralph H. Smuckler and George M. Belknap, of a Michigan city indicates also that the politists are more aware of technical and administrative problems of government than are the inactive citizens, even when both groups are interested in the same type of problem; a psychologist would say they have a greater "reality orientation" in that they see the way the governmental machinery actually meshes. The active citizens also are concerned more with local community problems as well as national problems, whereas the inactive citizens tend to be interested solely in national affairs.

QUESTIONS AND PROBLEMS

1. Can you think of one debatable question of any kind that has never, to your knowledge, been the subject of public opinion? If so, can you also state that the class or type of problem it represents has never found itself a subject of public opinion?
2. Give one example, not used in the text, of each force working to create opinion: culture, family, neighborhood, school, and church.
3. Using one issue of any daily newspaper, list all the expressions of opinion to be found outside of the sports section, and give the source of each. What part of the total is supplied by the editors, would you estimate?
4. Select what appear to you to be the five most prominent national issues of the week. Interview five friends or other people to determine whether they have heard of the issues, and, if so, how much they know about them. Report your study in 400 words.

5. Can you think of any kinds of political activity that were left out of the test reported in the text? If so, do you believe that including it or them would change the total pattern of activity? Explain your answer.

6. What differences of trait and behavior distinguish the active from the inactive citizens, as groupings?