

ADAM J. BERINSKY

# SILENT VOICES

**Public Opinion and Political Participation in America**



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POLITICAL PARTICIPATION  
IN AMERICA

*Adam J. Berinsky*

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON AND OXFORD

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PUBLISHED BY PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS, 41 WILLIAM STREET,  
PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY 08540  
IN THE UNITED KINGDOM: PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS,  
3 MARKET PLACE, WOODSTOCK, OXFORDSHIRE OX20 1SY  
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SECOND PRINTING, AND FIRST PAPERBACK PRINTING, 2006  
PAPERBACK ISBN-13: 978-0-691-12378-3  
PAPERBACK ISBN-10: 0-691-12378-0

***THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS HAS CATALOGED THE CLOTH EDITION  
OF THIS BOOK AS FOLLOWS***

BERINSKY, ADAM J., 1970–  
SILENT VOICES : PUBLIC OPINION AND POLITICAL PARTICIPATION  
IN AMERICA / ADAM J. BERINSKY.  
P. CM.

INCLUDES BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES AND INDEX.

ISBN 0-691-11587-7 (ALK. PAPER)

1. PUBLIC OPINION—UNITED STATES. 2. PUBLIC OPINION POLLS. 3. POLITICAL  
PARTICIPATION—UNITED STATES. 4. REPRESENTATION GOVERNMENT AND  
REPRESENTATION—UNITED STATES. 5. UNITED STATES—RACE RELATIONS—  
GOVERNMENT POLICY—PUBLIC OPINION. 6. PUBLIC WELFARE—UNITED STATES—  
PUBLIC OPINION. 7. VIETNAMESE CONFLICT, 1961–1975—PUBLIC OPINION. I. TITLE.

HN90.P8B47 2004

303.3'8—DC21 2003056326

BRITISH LIBRARY CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA IS AVAILABLE

THIS BOOK HAS BEEN COMPOSED IN PALATINO

PRINTED ON ACID-FREE PAPER. ∞

PUP.PRINCETON.EDU

PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER,

*Burton T. Berinsky*

1931–1991



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THESE WORDS—the last of this book that I write—are the sweetest. They are sweet not only because they signal the end of this long project, but also because they give me the opportunity to thank those individuals and organizations that made this book possible. Over the last five years, interactions with numerous scholars have caused me to change my thinking on the technical and normative issues addressed in this book many times over. Sometimes, I ended up back where I started. But more often, the comments and criticisms raised by my colleagues made the final product better than it would have been had I been left to my own devices. Any remaining errors are here despite the best efforts of my friends and colleagues in the profession. So if the acknowledgments that follow seem overly effusive, it is only because I have accumulated a series of debts to which it is difficult to do justice.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my undergraduate advisors at Wesleyan University, Richard Boyd and Martha Crenshaw. Over the last twelve years, they have been my teachers, my advisors, and my friends. They encouraged me to pursue a career that I had never considered, but one that is far more fulfilling than the life as a corporate attorney I had envisioned for myself.

Next, I would like to thank the members of my doctoral committee at Michigan: Nancy Burns, John Jackson, Don Kinder, Ken Kollman, and Mike Traugott. I am especially indebted to my co-chairs Don and Nancy. I came to Michigan with the hopes of working with Don. Meeting Nancy in my second year at Michigan was the most pleasant surprise of my graduate career. Without their support, their patience when listening to my sometimes incoherent and often neurotic rambling, and their thoughtful feedback, this book would not have been possible. They asked the tough questions that I did not always want to hear, but in the process, they made me a better scholar.

I was also fortunate to have an amazing number of colleagues at Michigan and—in time—at Princeton and other departments with whom to discuss the ideas that developed into this book. Conversations and correspondence with Chris Achen, Scott Allard, Mike Alvarez, Gary Bass, Lewis Bateman, John Brehm, Gregory Caldaria, Kathy Cramer, Fred Cutler, Stanley Feldman, Paul Freedman, Marty Gilens, Fred Greenstein, Paul Gronke, Kim Gross, Vincent Hutchings, Cindy Kam, Jeffery Lewis, Eric Oliver, Vincent Price, Anne Sartori, Ken Schultz, Norbert Schwarz, Joshua Tucker, Cara Wong, several anony-

#### xiv ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

mous reviewers, and—in particular—Larry Bartels were all extremely valuable. I would also like to single out several individuals for special (heroic?) mention: Jake Bowers, Jamie Druckman, Tali Mendelberg, and Nick Winter. They have read at one point or another—and in some cases at many points—nearly every word in this book. The ideas presented here have been profoundly shaped by our interactions, and I am eternally grateful to them. In more formal settings, seminars at Columbia University, Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, New York University, Northwestern University, Princeton University, the University of Chicago, the University of Michigan, the University of Minnesota, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and Yale University were valuable as I brought this project to completion over the last several years. Finally, Chuck Myers at Princeton University Press was an enthusiastic supporter of this manuscript from its beginning and provided a great deal of guidance and advice over the last couple years.

I am also grateful to a cadre of research assistants. Alison Franklin, Chris Karpowitz, Jonathan Ladd, Gabriel Lenz, James McGhee, Paul Gerber, Ellie Powell, Alice Savage, and Elizabeth Suhay all provided outstanding assistance. For financial support, I thank the University of Michigan and Princeton University. And I thank the University of Wisconsin Press for permission to reprint materials originally published in “The Two Faces of Public Opinion,” *American Journal of Political Science* 43 (October 1999): 1209–1230, and “Silent Voices: Social Welfare Policy Opinions and Political Equality in America,” *American Journal of Political Science* 46 (April 2002): 276–287, as well as Blackwell Publishers for permission to reprint materials originally published in “Political Context and the Survey Response: The Dynamics of Racial Policy Opinion,” *The Journal of Politics* 64 (May 2002): 567–584.

Above all I would like to thank Deirdre Logan, for everything. She came into my life around the same time as the ideas that developed into this project. Then, she was my friend. Now, she is my wife. I am happy that this book is finally finished. But I am happier that my life with Deirdre is just beginning.

## **SILENT VOICES**



# INTRODUCTION

## REPRESENTATION, PUBLIC OPINION, AND THE VOICE OF THE PEOPLE

THROUGHOUT his eight years as president, the recurrent image of Bill Clinton was that of a weather vane, constantly shifting to and fro in response to the fickle political winds of opinion polls. “Clinton’s legacy is in many ways a story about polls,” writes John F. Harris of the *Washington Post*, capturing a prominent view of Clinton. “It is true that no previous president read public opinion surveys with the same hypnotic intensity. And no predecessor has integrated his pollster so thoroughly into the policymaking operation of his White House” (Harris 2000). Some of Clinton’s own staffers have taken the view that he was too reliant on polls. As Harris notes, former Clinton aid George Stephanopoulos and former Labor Secretary Robert Reich both wrote memoirs that recalled bitterly Clinton’s reliance on consultants and polling.

Given the derisive tone of such portrayals, one might think that George W. Bush, Clinton’s Republican successor in the White House, would carefully avoid such a shallow appearance. Not surprisingly, during the 2000 campaign, Bush repeatedly claimed “we take stands without having to run polls and focus groups to tell us where we stand” (Carney and Dickerson 2000). As president, Bush publicly sought to distance himself from a Clintonesque reliance on polls. During a press conference concerning tax reform in May 2001, for example, Bush argued, “I’m not really that concerned about standing in polls. I am doing what I think is the right thing to do. And the right thing to do is to have proposed a tax relief package that is an integral part of a fiscal policy that makes sense.”<sup>1</sup>

Although Bush may have claimed not to care about polls, he funded a polling apparatus comparable in scope to that of the Clinton administration. In the 2000 campaign, the Bush administration was kept abreast of public opinion through polls and focus groups paid for by the Republican National Committee and conducted by Bush’s campaign pollster, Matthew Dowd (Hall 2001). Through the first two years

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in “Excerpts from Bush News Conference on Tax Relief, McVeigh and Energy,” *New York Times*, May 12, 2001.

## 2 INTRODUCTION

of his presidency, Bush continued to rely on polls—especially those conducted by his principal pollster, Jan van Lohuizen. All told, in 2001, Bush spent almost a million dollars on operations to gauge the public reaction to Social Security reform and his energy plan. Though this figure is approximately half the amount Clinton spent during his first year in office, it represents a substantial sum of money (Green 2002).

Such developments should not surprise those who follow American politics. Though it may be an open question as to whether politicians pander to opinion polls or use those polls to craft support for their preferred policies (Jacobs and Shapiro 2000), what is not in dispute is that polls lay at the center of American politics. Polls provide the most obvious and ongoing link between citizens and their leaders. Regardless of one's views of the polling enterprise, the fact remains that surveys have become a critical mechanism for the communication of information between the mass public and political elites. In addition, unlike other forms of political participation, polls do not require citizens to make a significant investment of time or resources to make their voice heard. Thus polls have the potential to ensure that all citizens are heard by politicians and policymakers. Understanding the information carried in polls—how well polls measure the underlying preferences and perspectives of individuals in society—is therefore a critical political question.

In this book, I cast a critical eye on public opinion polls in the United States. I demonstrate that opinion polls may fail to equally represent the preferences of all Americans with regard to some of the most important issues of our time: racial policy, the scope of the social welfare state, and attitudes toward war. This misrepresentation arises from what I term "exclusion bias"—the exclusion of the preferences of the sometimes sizable portion of the public who say they "don't know" where they stand on the issues of the day, due either to an absence of those resources that would allow them to form a coherent opinion or to a fear of expressing sentiments that might paint them in an unfavorable light. The political voice of these abstainers is, in certain cases, systematically different from the voice of those who respond to poll questions. The existence of these "silent voices" must lead us to question whether polls truly are representative of the underlying sentiments of the entire mass public. Thus, to understand public opinion in America, we must carefully consider the political interests and values of the politically silent. In this way, we can see what information we capture with opinion polls, and—more importantly—what information we leave behind.

## Public Opinion, Political Participation, and the Voice of the People

Given that democracy cannot function without some form of mass input into the political process, how should we best gauge public opinion? To make the compromises and tradeoffs essential to the functioning of a political system, we need information about both the direction and the intensity of the public will. When considering the place of public opinion in the government process, then, it is important to strike a balance that enables the broad expression of political views and recognizes that some preferences are more intensely held than others (see, for example, Dahl 1956).

Direct political participation facilitates the transmission of intense preferences and perspectives to political elites. If citizens care enough about a particular issue, they may convey their particular desires to the government in a variety of ways. They may contact government officials, donate money to political causes, or become involved in electoral campaigns (Bauer, Pool, and Dexter 1963; Herbst 1993, 1998; Kingdon 1973; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). Because the civic sphere in the United States is relatively permeable and citizens are free to voice matters of concern to them, traditional forms of participation do a fair job of ensuring that intense interests are heard in the political process.<sup>2</sup>

Though participation may represent adequately some intense interests, it does a poor job of guaranteeing political equality. Political activists, after all, do not come to the political world by chance. Instead, they are drawn disproportionately from those groups more advantaged in the resources that aid participation, such as education and disposable income. Activists therefore differ in politically consequential ways from those who do not engage in politics. As Verba, Schlozman, and Brady conclude, "the voice of the people as expressed through participation comes from a limited and unrepresentative set of citizens" (1995, 2; see also Schattschneider 1960; Verba and Nie

<sup>2</sup> Of course, this is not true for *all* issues. The two party system in the United States undoubtedly serves to restrict certain issues from reaching the policymaking table altogether (Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Schattschneider 1960). But the point here is a relative, not an absolute, comparison. No form of political participation perfectly represents the interests of the mass public. Thus, we need to consider the advantages and disadvantages of different forms of participation in relation to each other. Here, then, I speak of the *relative* benefits and shortcomings of direct forms participation, such as contacting officials.

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1972). Some interests might be muted, not because citizens lack concerns relevant to a particular controversy, but instead because they have difficulty making themselves heard on the political stage. For example, those citizens who benefit from direct government aid programs, such as welfare, by and large lack the economic and civic resources necessary to contribute to political candidates or effectively petition their representatives on their own behalf (see Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

But many observers believe that where traditional forms of participation fail, opinion polls or surveys may succeed. Over the course of the twentieth century, polls have emerged as an important tool to measure the public will. Surveys have become a major component of political reporting, and—as the discussion of the polling operations of Bush and Clinton above demonstrates—politicians are willing to expend large sums to conduct surveys (Brehm 1993; Frankovic 1992; Ladd and Benson 1992; Warren 2001).<sup>3</sup> But polls are not merely pervasive in modern politics. More important for present purposes, they seem to ensure that the full spectrum of political interests in the political system is heard. The reason is straightforward: Surveys, if executed correctly, are conducted through random sampling. Under this system, every citizen has an equal chance of being selected for a poll, regardless of his or her personal circumstance. Furthermore, by underwriting the direct costs of participation, opinion polls ensure that disparities in politically relevant

<sup>3</sup> A great deal of evidence exists concerning the pervasiveness of polls. By way of illustration, a 1989 Roper study found that over 80 percent of American newspapers were directly involved in some form of opinion polling. And much of this polling concerns the public's preferences. While many media-sponsored polls measure candidate support in forthcoming elections, not all media polls are "horse race polls" of this sort. In fact, a large number of polls—40 percent in election years and 70 percent in off years—do not deal with horse races (Ladd and Benson 1992). Thus the media are concerned not only with who is ahead in a given election, but also with the public's views on current political controversies. Candidates too are extremely interested in polls. One study, for example, found that the amount of money spent each year on opinion polling by politicians grew from \$6 million in 1964 to \$40 million in 1984 (Crespi 1989). A study in the late 1990s estimated that candidates spent well over \$100 million combined during each campaign season (Warren 2001). Journalistic accounts of the relationship between politicians and political consultants suggest that politicians are extremely reliant on their pollsters (see Moore 1992; Morris 1997). Moreover, a poll of policy leaders conducted in 2001 by the Henry J. Kaiser Foundation in collaboration with Public Perspective found that a large plurality (46 percent) of those leaders believed that polls were the "best way for officials to learn what the majority of people in our country think about important issues." (The policy leader sample was interviewed December 21, 2000, through March 30, 2001, and included three hundred senior executive branch officials, senior congressional staff members, think tank scholars, lobbyists, trade association executives, and two members of Congress).

resources will not discourage the expression of politically relevant values and interests. Survey organizations, after all, contact respondents, not the other way around. In short, polls hold special appeal as a form of gauging the public's will because they appear to be free of the resource-based bias that plagues traditional forms of participation.

This conception of opinion polls as broadly representative of public sentiment has long pervaded academic and popular discussions of polls. Polling pioneer George Gallup advanced the virtues of surveys as a means for political elites to assess the collective "mandate of the people." If properly designed and conducted, Gallup argued, polls would act as a "sampling referendum" and provide a more accurate measure of popular opinion than more traditional methods, such as reading mail from constituents and attending to newspapers (Gallup and Rae 1940).<sup>4</sup> More recently, in his presidential address at the 1996 American Political Science Association Meeting, Sidney Verba argued, "sample surveys provide the closest approximation to an unbiased representation of the public because participation in a survey requires no resources and because surveys eliminate the bias inherent in the fact that participants in politics are self-selected. . . . Surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce—equal representation of all citizens" (1996, 3; see also Geer 1996).

Even critics of the survey research enterprise have adopted the populist conception embodied in the work of Gallup and Verba. Polling critic Susan Herbst writes, "Modern survey techniques enable the pollster to draw a representative sample of Americans. . . . The public expression techniques of the past—such as coffeehouses, salons, and petitions—did not allow for such comprehensive representation of the entire public's views" (1993, 166). Benjamin Ginsberg offers further criticisms of polls precisely because they are *too* inclusive of popular sentiment. Surveys, he argues in his 1986 book, *The Captive Public*, dilute the intensity of those political actors who choose to make their voices heard on the public stage. As Ginsberg writes, "polls underwrite or subsidize the costs of eliciting, organizing, and publicly expressing opinion. . . . As a result, the beliefs of those who care relatively little or even hardly at all are as likely to be publicized as the opinions of those who care a great deal about the matter in question" (1986, 64).

<sup>4</sup> In the early days of opinion polling, some researchers advocated using opinion surveys as a measure of the public will in other forums as well. Waterbury (1953) advocated the use of opinion surveys in some civil litigation cases. Waterbury suggests, for example, that an opinion poll could be used to justify a manufacturer's claim that it engaged in truth in advertising. If the majority of consumers agreed that the product in question was not worse than advertised, the judge could use that as a basis to uphold the company's claim.