

## The Citizen as Respondent: Sample Surveys and American Democracy Presidential Address, American Political Science Association, 1995

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**C**itizen participation is the main way in which the public communicates its needs and preferences to the government and induces the government to be responsive. Since participation depends on resources and resources are unequally distributed, the resulting communication is a biased representation of the public. Thus, the democratic ideal of equal consideration is violated. 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 selection bias inherent in the fact that participants in politics are self-selected. The contrast between the participatory process and the sample survey is used to highlight the nature of the bias in the former. Surveys, however, are not seen as a practical way of providing more equal representation.

**T**he study of political participation and the sample survey are closely linked. The latter is the main method by which the former has been studied (Barnes and Kaase 1979; Rosenstone and Hansen 1993; Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Nie, and Kim 1979; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995). There is a good reason for that connection, since surveys give the researcher access to the "public," an otherwise broad, amorphous, and hard-to-deal-with phenomenon. Surveys tell us what the public does and provide data for analyses of why they do it.

Surveys are especially useful for dealing with issues of democratic representation. Participation is a mechanism for representation, a means by which governing officials are informed of the preferences and needs of the public and are induced to respond to those preferences and needs. It is crucial, therefore, to know how well or how badly the participatory system represents the public to those leaders. But how do we know what the "real" picture is, the interests, preferences, and needs of the public? The sample survey is key to answering this question. In the work on participation by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995), the representative sample survey was used to provide baseline information on the state of the public—its needs and preferences—in order to ascertain the extent to which the messages communicated by the active citizens distort the situation of the public as a whole.

There is a close connection between subject and method in this research, between citizen participation and representative democracy, on the one hand, and survey research, on the other. The sample survey is a major social science tool. In addition, it is a technology with an important influence on representative democracy. The nature of the technology, particularly the use of random sampling, has an intimate connection with issues of representation. Social science technology, the

political theory of representation, and some real issues in contemporary American politics all come together in relation to political surveys.

Surveys create information that would not otherwise exist. What would our democracy be like if no one had invented them? In particular, I want to consider the social survey as a means of political participation. Citizens participate as voters, protesters, letter writers, campaign contributors, and in many other ways. That participation is one of the major means by which governing officials learn about the needs and preferences of the public. It is not the only means, of course; interest groups and the media also provide input. But citizen activity is perhaps the major way the public's needs and preferences are communicated to governing elites. When citizens participate as respondents, what is added to that flow of information by surveys? In trying to answer this question, I hope to address not only the role of surveys but also some more general questions about the nature of democratic representation.

### POLITICAL EQUALITY

The problem in representation with which I wish to deal is as follows: Democracy implies responsiveness by governing elites to the needs and preferences of the citizenry. More than that, it implies equal responsiveness; in the democratic ideal, elected officials should give equal consideration to the needs and preferences of all citizens. This equal consideration is embodied most clearly in the principle of one person, one vote.

Equality, as we all know, is one of the more complex and multidimensional concepts we have, given the variety of factors on which it can be based and the fundamental heterogeneity of human beings. Let me briefly indicate what I have in mind. I am not concerned with the extent to which the government in fact treats all citizens equally in the policies it produces; what that would mean and whether it is possible is beyond me. I want to deal with a narrower but still basic issue. Rather than looking at the results of the policy process, I want to focus on the extent to which governing officials have the capacity to provide equal consideration, in particular, whether they have equal information about the needs and preferences of all citizens. If some citizens are invisible, one cannot respond to them.

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This means, in turn, that citizens have to supply that information. Thus, if the government is to have the capability of giving equal consideration to the needs and preferences of all citizens, the public must be equally capable of providing that information. They must provide information about themselves—who they are, what they want, what they need. If citizen activity is the main way in which that is done, then democratic responsiveness depends on citizen participation, and equal responsiveness depends on equal participation.

Of course, things do not work out that way. Citizen voices are very unequal. Not everyone votes. More important, there are many more ways in which citizens can be active, and here, of course, voices are more unequal. Only small proportions of the citizenry work in campaigns or make contributions. There may be a flood of letters to Washington and, more recently, a flood of faxes and e-mail. But only a small proportion of the public uses these means, and that minority is not a random sample of the population; it comes disproportionately from the more advantaged members of society (Verba and Nie 1972; Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995).

Furthermore, not only are some voices raised while others are still, but also those who raise their voices differ in their effectiveness when they do so. In summer 1995, members of the American Political Science Association received a memorandum about threatened abolition of National Science Foundation (NSF) support for the social sciences. Through intense efforts the program was saved. In the office of Congressman Walker, who introduced the amendment to eliminate social science funding in NSF, one staffer is quoted as saying: "Those ladies and gentlemen in the social sciences sure know how to write letters." We ought to. Writing compelling communications is our business.

In our research (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, chapter 11) we measured the opportunities of our respondents to learn civic skills—how to write a letter, make a public presentation, organize a meeting. As you would expect, there are great differences across social groups in their capacity not only to speak up but also to speak up effectively. The differences in our data are striking. Among people with advanced education and a professional level job, about 90% say they plan meetings and give public presentations. The comparable figure for workers with high school education in lower status jobs is around 5%. The point is obvious but also crucial for understanding political capacity.

That some are active and others are not would be important only if the activists differed in politically relevant ways from the inactive, that is, if they differed in their needs and preferences. Some studies suggest that it does not matter much who is active, since the policy preferences of activists differ relatively little from those of the inactive (Wolfinger and Rosenstone 1980). But that finding concerns the difference between voters and nonvoters in relation to policy preferences (as revealed in standard National Election Studies [NES] questions). The finding does not generalize to political participation more broadly. When one compares activists and inactivists not in terms of responses to issue questions designed by the surveyor but in terms of economic circumstances,

need for government assistance, or participatory agendas—the actual issues that animate activity—the discrepancies are much more substantial. In addition, there is variation across activities in the extent to which participants are similar to or different from inactive citizens. Voters are relatively representative of the public. In terms of other forms of participation—acts with both more clout and a greater capacity to communicate information—distortion in participatory input is more substantial (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, chapter 7). As we noted, the participatory input is tilted in the direction of the more advantaged demographic groups in society. Their voices convey a different message than would be conveyed by the more quiescent.

All this means that governing officials receive more information about needs and preferences from some parts of the public than from others. If we believe that each individual is the best judge of his or her needs and preferences, then the differential expression of these needs and preferences through differential activity levels means that officials receive a biased view of the public.

In a market—in an economic system—such differential engagement is expected and poses no problem. Customer voices, as revealed by their consumer behavior, are not equal. People have different preferences and different budget constraints. No one expects equality in a market-based economy with differential income and wealth.

What about politics? Here, too, preferences vary; some people want things from the government, others do not; and those who want things want different things. Budget constraints also differ. Some people have more resources than others—money, time, skills, connections—and these enable them to act and act effectively. This is what explains differential political activity and the resulting bias in information received by the government.

That some are active and some quiescent is inevitable. But it makes a big difference whether the quiescence is due to preference or resources—to not wanting to act or to being unable to act. If people are not active because they have nothing they want from the government or because they choose to allocate their time to other activities, this poses little challenge to the notion of equal consideration of the needs and preferences of all. But if they are not active because they do not have the resources to be active, that is more of a challenge.

In his recent book, *Inequality Reexamined* (1992), Amartya Sen argues for an approach to equality based on the equal capability to achieve one's goals. It is an attractive notion in relation to political equality. It is something less than equality of outcome—policies that treat everyone equally. But it is something more than the usual notion of equality of opportunity, which ordinarily refers to the absence of barriers to accomplishment. In Sen's approach, equal capability includes the absence of barriers and the presence of the means or the resources needed to accomplish one's objectives. The participatory system in the United States today provides equality of opportunity in that there are few if any legal impediments to political activity. But it is a system based on unequal resources and, therefore, unequal capabilities.

## SURVEYS IN AMERICAN POLITICAL LIFE

This is the background to my concern with surveys. Citizens also participate as respondents. The sample survey is a special source of information about the public because the citizen voice expressed does not, as does the participatory voice, depend on having resources or—and this adds an important complexity—on being motivated to participate. This makes the survey a special kind of voice of the people, with some interesting advantages and disadvantages.

The pioneers of political surveys, Gallup, Crossley, and Roper, were optimistic about this new technique. Surveys, they predicted, would be widely used, would bring science and precision into an area where there had previously just been speculation, and would create a new and more responsive democracy (Converse 1987, Gallup and Rae 1940).

They were right about how much surveys would be used. Public opinion polls have become ubiquitous in politics. No political campaign can be conducted without them. Polls provide information that did not previously exist. They allow adjustments of campaign strategies to the winds of opinion, something impossible before polling, when a campaign strategy would be set at the beginning of a campaign and basically adhered to. Anthony Downs predicts that campaign managers will steer their parties and candidates toward the middle of the distribution of opinions. That may be the approach dictated by the logic of vote maximization, but one can only steer in that direction if one knows where the median voter is located. Now, surveys give both parties information on this and may indeed allow campaigners to follow the dictates of theory (Geer 1991).

Polls are closely watched between elections. A presidential administration without a pollster is as unlikely as one without a national security advisor. From the President of the United States on down, elected officials monitor presidential popularity and the response of the public to policy initiatives. The presidential approval questions—one of the longest series of replicated questions—are a running retrospective evaluation of the chief executive's performance. The evidence seems fairly clear that they affect the ability of the president to be effective in Washington (Brody 1991, Edwards 1980, Rivers and Rose 1985). In addition, polls give some content to the level of public support by dealing with the reactions of the public to particular policies. Polls on every issue, large and small, appear in the media. Indeed, virtually every report on a current issue—from Medicare to Bosnia to the O.J. Simpson trial—contains information on what the public thinks. The range is very wide. Surveys hold, as it were, the mirror up to the nation.

Surveys are, I have always believed, a peculiarly U.S. product. The survey industry is now worldwide, but there are good reasons why it developed in and diffused from the United States as an academic research tool, as an instrument in politics, and as a technique for commerce. It fits the consumer-oriented U.S. economy. It fits U.S. culture, where individuals are supposed to have ideas and express them, and where people are accustomed to

listening and talking to strangers. And it fits the U.S. polity, where institutions are weak, and therefore the views and attitudes of citizens—as autonomous individuals—make more of a difference in their political behavior than is the case where a person's party, religion, or ethnicity is more predictive.

## SURVEYS AS SCIENCE, SURVEYS AS REPRESENTATION

Two main features of the sample survey make it particularly attractive in the U.S. context: its "scientificness" and representativeness (Herbst 1993). Our society vacillates between a belief in science and the expert and a belief in populism and the wisdom of the ordinary citizen. Surveys satisfy both. They give us a scientific measure of the people's will. It is no wonder that surveys play such a major role in the market, in politics, and in academic research.

Surveys produce just what democracy is supposed to produce—equal representation of all citizens. The sample survey is rigorously egalitarian; it is designed so that each citizen has an equal chance to participate and an equal voice when participating. Here is where science and political representation meet. In the social sciences one of the great threats to valid inference, perhaps the most common, is selection bias (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994). Researchers go to great lengths to avoid it. The random sample is a method for eliminating bias. Survey design eliminates bias in two ways: The respondent does not self-select to enter the survey (that is why we reject mail-in polls using forms clipped out of magazines), and the interviewers are given careful instructions as to whom they should select (that is why we reject quota sampling).

Surveys are by no means perfectly random. Poll respondents are not perfectly representative. Some are hard to find; increasingly, many refuse to participate. Pollsters seek out the respondents, but many cannot be reached, a problem especially severe for telephone surveys. Nor are those who cannot be reached a random group. They tend to be like those uncaptured by the census—people with no stable dwelling place, people who are missed by society in general. Once contacted, people may refuse to take part, a growing problem in recent years. In the early days of the NES, refusal rates were below 10%. In recent years, surveys such as NES or the General Social Survey (GSS) of the National Opinion Research Center have been experiencing refusal rates in the 25–30% range.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The nonparticipants in surveys are analyzed by Brehm (1993, chapter 2), who calls them phantom respondents. They differ from the public as a whole but in somewhat surprising ways. Respondents overrepresent the elderly and women, which is not a surprise. According to Brehm's analysis, however, the underrepresentation of the poor and minorities that we might have expected does not appear in the data. The patterns are somewhat varied across survey organizations, but it appears as if the NES and the GSS both overrepresent African Americans and underrepresent the rich. Education is the best single predictor of political activity. NES telephone interviews are consistent with this, as they underestimate the proportion in the population with less than a high school education. Yet, the face-to-face interviews of NES and GSS overrepresent those with lower education levels.

Surveys are not perfectly representative but offer, nevertheless, a better cross-section of the public than do almost any other means, and certainly they are more representative than any of the modes of citizen activity. Surveys provide us with a relatively unbiased view of the public by combining science and representativeness, indeed, by achieving representativeness through science. They are very like elections in which each individual has an equal voice only better. They get better turnout, since good surveys seek out the participants and do not passively wait for them to come to the polls. They get richer information. The vote says little about the preferences of voters except in the narrow sense of their choice of candidate. Surveys can probe preferences on many issues. Indeed, one of the uses to which surveys are put is the reduction in mandate uncertainty after an election. And surveys are more continuous; they monitor the public between elections.

### **RANDOM AND BIASED SELECTION: SOCIAL SURVEYS AND THE REAL WORLD OF POLITICS**

The essence of the science of surveys and the essence of the representativeness of surveys are both found in the random processes by which participants are selected. But this also makes surveys very unreal. The processes by which participants are selected are fundamentally different in the controlled world of the social survey and the real world of political participation. Politics may be studied with techniques that try to eliminate selection bias—that is what our profession is all about—but real life is dominated by selection bias. We select the circumstances that then affect our social and economic life. We choose schools, jobs, spouses, locations. We choose within constraints to be sure, but the constraints are by no means constant or random across individuals. The constraints are biased as well.

The same happens in political life. The recent analysis by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995) of the processes by which citizens come to be active is, in fact, a study of selection bias in the real world. Citizens differ in motivation and resources; thus, they self-select to take part in politics because of this differential motivation and because they are differentially constrained by resources. This biased selection process produces a biased participatory population. The voices of the well educated and the well heeled sound more loudly.

Each method of selection—unbiased survey sampling and the socially structured real world processes of selection—produces a different result. Random sample surveys are statistically sound, and they treat each individual qua individual the same. Polls provide information about the public as a whole, motivated or unmotivated, resource rich or resource poor, rather than about those who make their presence known through their political participation. Polls are thus an important tool for equal representation. This also means that polls take

no account of race or ethnicity, wealth or education, passion or political commitment. In short, they ignore the mainsprings of political life, and this makes them very artificial.

Of what use are such artificial measures of the public? Here is where surveys intersect with one of the basic issues of citizen representation: the meaning of quiescence. Ordinary modes of citizen activity—voting, writing letters, going to a protest, taking part in a campaign or a community project—allow quiescence; they are voluntary, and no one has to take part and express preferences. Surveys do not let people be quiescent; they chase them down and ask them questions. If people are hard to find, the good survey looks for them, calling again and again. And random-digit dialing rather than phone book listings are used in order to catch those would-be shirkers who get unlisted numbers so they can avoid their civic obligation to take phone calls during dinner.

### **PREFERENCE OR CAPABILITY**

How important it is to hear the voice of the otherwise silent depends on why they are silent: because they do not want to voice their preferences or because they do not have the capability to do so. What people do is a result of their choices within constraints, of their preferences and their capacity to achieve them. Much of the debate between liberals and conservatives over government provision of benefits is about the relative importance of choice and constraint. Do people on welfare choose that status by their unwillingness to look for jobs and their earlier willful neglect of education? Or are they constrained by lack of job opportunities and bad schools? The battle is currently being won by those who stress choice. But constraints are also important.

All of this applies to citizen participation. If some are inactive, is it because they lack motivation or lack capability? Distinguishing between motivation and capability is easy conceptually but often hard in practice. The two are related. If people lack the capability, their motivation goes down. If they have little motivation, they do not try to increase their capability. Those who have few resources will be discouraged from taking part in politics; those who are uninterested in public affairs will not care to develop civic skills.

Despite the difficulty, the distinction can be made in particular cases. Let me draw on the data from our civic voluntarism study to present two contrasting situations, one in which differential activity is driven by differential motivation, and one in which it is driven by differential capacity.

### **Motivation and the Politics of Abortion**

Consider motivation or the lack of it. Much activity derives from the greater intensity of preferences among the activists. The examples of the intensely concerned minority are legion; indeed, they are the basis for much of the political action in the United States. I will choose one example from our research, the politics of abortion (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, chapter 14). The

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Academic surveys, although not perfect, have better response rates than media polls, many of which have rates that call the accuracy of the survey into question (Brady and Orren 1992).

public at large—as revealed by surveys—is divided on abortion rights. Exactly how they divide depends on the questions asked. Most citizens are not pro or anti; they are pro under some circumstances and anti under others. On balance, however, the public tilts in a pro-choice direction. Twice as many respondents in our survey are in the farthest pro-choice position as are in the farthest pro-life position. In addition, those with the strongest pro-choice views have more participatory resources than do those with the strongest pro-life views. They are three times as likely to have a college education and substantially more likely to belong to an organization. They are the kinds of people you would expect to be more active in politics, and they are. That activity, however, is spread across all sorts of issues. Those who take the more extreme pro-life positions are not particularly well endowed with participatory resources, tending on average to be less affluent and less skilled. They are, however, very motivated—intense in their views, concentrated on that particular issue, and likely to act on that issue. Thus, they provide much more of the action, especially the heated action like protesting, on abortion.

The concentration of activity among the pro-life respondents in our study is striking. We asked them about the subject of their activity, whether some issue motivated their letter to a representative, or the protest in which they took part, or their activity in a campaign, and so on. We can then see how much of an individual's activity—across various acts—is focused on the same subject. Eleven percent of the activity of the pro-choice respondents concerns abortion; they are very active but are active about many things. The pro-life respondents, 58% of whose activity concerns abortion, are much more single-minded.

If elected officials heed the voices of the active citizens, they will give greater attention to the pro-life group than its proportion of the population warrants. That does not seem inappropriate, even in the face of the notion that each person's preferences should be given equal weight. There are preferences and preferences, and those strongly held ought to weigh more.

In such a situation, polls do not and should not eliminate the special consideration likely to be given to the intense minority. Rather, they mitigate it somewhat by providing information about preferences in the public at large. Officials can know, at least, that the activists do not represent the population as a whole. And the existence of a gap between the public as a whole and the activists can be used as part of the debate about the proper policy to follow. The quiescence of inactive citizens when they could be active if they cared more justifies paying less attention to them, but knowing their views adds an important ingredient to the political debate.

### Resources and the Politics of Benefits Programs

Consider, however, a situation in which the reason for silence is not lack of concern but lack of resources. Being the recipient of a government benefits program creates a motive for political activity, whether in order to protect

the program in general or to monitor one's own benefits. Recipients of some programs are less active than recipients of others. It is not that they care less about their program; rather, they lack the money and skills to undertake activity. A properly conducted survey can reveal that fact. It can uncover a part of the population whose silence does not reflect indifference.

An example is found in comparing those who receive Social Security and those who receive AFDC. There is reason to believe that the latter are more needy than the former. For example, our data show that people on AFDC are more than twice as likely to report serious problems in satisfying basic health, housing, and food needs in the previous year. Yet, the AFDC recipients are less well endowed with participatory resources; they have much less education and many fewer civic skills. The result is that three times as many of the Social Security recipients reported activity concerning that program as did AFDC recipients concerning theirs. The former are eight times more likely to belong to an organization concerned with Social Security than are AFDC recipients to belong to an organization concerned with their benefits program. As one would expect, those who receive benefits like Social Security, that is, widespread benefits that are not means tested, not only are more likely to be active in regard to their benefits than those receiving means-tested, welfare-type benefits but also are much more skilled in their activity.

Here, then, is a silent group which can be located through a survey and whose silence does not reflect low motivation but few resources. Note that what is learned through the survey is not the on-the-fly opinion of a group about whether to balance the budget by 2002 or 2007 but information about real needs—needs about which respondents are well informed and, indeed, better informed than anyone.

The ability of polls to get at a sample of individuals who might otherwise not be active is especially useful as a counter to organized expressions of preferences. In one sense, organized interests can benefit more from survey research. Polls are weapons of those who can afford to mount them, and this is more likely to be an organized interest than an unorganized group. Yet, surveys may reduce the monopoly that interest groups might otherwise have over information about the preferences of the public as a whole regarding the interest groups' issues or of their own membership and their purported clientele.

The NRA remains the classic example. Poll results on gun control have not overridden the power of the NRA, but they have been useful as a counterfoil. Legislators may still fear the concentrated resources the NRA can bring to bear, but polls showing that the public at large (and even gun owners) disagrees with the NRA give some ammunition—perhaps the wrong term here—to the other side.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, polls have shown that half the Cuban Americans in the United States disagree with the position of the National Cuban American Foundation, which believes we ought to isolate Cuba,<sup>3</sup> or that many

<sup>2</sup> *International Herald Tribune*, May 27, 1995, p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> *New York Times*, June 12, 1995, p. 9.

fundamentalist Christians do not support the political agenda of the religious right.

It takes a poll to locate resource poor, unorganized, and otherwise silent citizens. In general, polls can show that the noisy and overt “representatives” of the public or of particular parts of it do not necessarily speak for everyone. If the voices of activists are louder because of their greater intensity of concern, then they deserve the extra clout they have. If their amplified voices result from greater capacity to make themselves heard, however, then the principles of equality of consideration are violated. In the latter case, by searching out the otherwise inactive, asking them questions, and recording their answers, surveys may be thought of as providing the capacity for articulation that some citizens would otherwise lack.

### SURVEY DEMOCRACY?

I am certainly not recommending a government by survey. Gallup referred to the survey as a “sampling referendum,” but even he did not think of it as a means of legislating. Rather, I am arguing that one has to view surveys in the context of the participatory process, which exists with or without surveys. Some argue that surveys create a leadership which follows the polls rather than leading. But surveys per se do not make some leaders abandon leadership to follow public whim. In the absence of surveys, such leaders would still sway with the wind of opinion. The wind would just blow from different quarters, more likely from the better parts of town.

Polls are thus a way to give everyone a voice, but they do not reflect the strongest of voices. The information polls communicate may be equal, but it is also limited. And the limitation derives from the strongest feature of polls, the fact that they represent all citizens equally. What message is sent by a method that gives voice to all citizens, with little regard for their level of information or their motivation to participate, and one whose messages are all *in response* to questions selected by and posed by strangers at the door? Certainly, the messages are not the clearest.

One limitation on the role of surveys relates to agendas. First, because the initiative is taken by the surveyor rather than the surveyed, the agenda reflects the interests of the poll taker. It gives the inarticulate a chance to express their views and their concerns, but only on the issues that the surveyor thinks are important. Second, since surveyors have their own agenda—to increase readership, or find information to help a particular candidate, or test a pet academic theory—the set of issues covered may be very different from that which is on the mind of the respondents.

Another limitation has to do with the questions asked: The answers received depend on them. The voice of the citizenry, especially the otherwise quiescent who are of special interest here, can sound very different depending on what is asked.

There is another qualification on the ability of surveys to equalize the voice of the resource poor. Few resources may be needed to respond to a survey, but real resources

are required to conduct a survey. Although the selection of respondents may not be biased, the selection of when to have a survey and what to ask (and how to interpret the data) certainly are. This gives a louder voice to the more affluent in several ways. Well-heeled campaigners and wealthy interests can afford to take their own polls. They can then use them as they want, including selective reporting. On top of that, to do a poll one needs to hire professionals, which takes money, and campaigns thus value contributions of money rather than time. Money is, in turn, much more stratified than time; the affluent have money (of course), but time is more equally available to both the advantaged and the disadvantaged (Verba, Schlozman, and Brady 1995, chapter 10). Thus, the survey process reintroduces some of the socioeconomic stratification found in political activity through decisions as to when, what, and whom to survey.

Another qualification is that what people answer—what they think is important, how they evaluate policies and politicians—is in good part a reaction to what they hear from the media or from governing officials. Thus, the questions asked and the answers given do not come from a separate autonomous public but are affected by the processes of politics and policy that they may, in turn, influence. As in so many other areas of politics and political analysis, there is a serious problem of endogeneity.

Finally, polls provide low-grade information. Answers to closed questions do not capture the richness of individuals' views. And the views, themselves, are often ill-formed. Indeed, it is commonplace to note that the opinions are often nonexistent until the question is asked and the respondent is faced with the necessity to answer.

This last point, about the quality of information in polls, needs qualification. We have all been trained to be suspicious of survey results on issues far from the consciousness of respondents, when they are asked for opinions on some policy matter. But surveys can give better information than that. It all depends on the subject of the questions. Some information about the public is fairly solid—its positions on issues, its social circumstances, its needs; people know the answers, and the answers are stable. In some of the examples I gave above, questions were asked about whether the respondents participated in Social Security or in AFDC and whether they had faced serious problems paying for necessities in the past year. These are important questions about citizen need, and the individual citizen—of whatever level of sophistication—knows the answers better than anyone. Citizens know their own life circumstances. They also know their own values, and although their values may be in conflict one with another (whose values are not?), they are likely to be fairly stable.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Attitudes on complex public policies may be ill-informed and changeable. But as John Zaller (1993) has argued, the “on-the-fly” answers that polls elicit have a certain logic to them. They often reflect a balancing, not a careful balancing but a balancing nevertheless, of alternative values. They are a form of quick-and-dirty reasoning.

## CAN THE QUIESCENT GAIN A VOICE?

This brings me back to my concern with the politically quiescent. How can constraints be broken to achieve the democratic ideal of equal voice? Surveys break the constraints by seeking out those who would otherwise be inactive, but the voice is not very strong or clear. Another means of bringing in the quiescent is political mobilization. Resource poor and apathetic citizens can be brought out to vote or take other actions by social movements or political organizations. There are many historical examples, the civil rights movement being one of the most important. Our research shows, however, that for most activity, the forces of mobilization bring in the same people who would be active spontaneously. There is a vast network of what one might call day-to-day political recruiters, people who call for campaign contributions, get people out to a community meeting, or mobilize citizens to write their representative. These recruiters seek those with motivation and resources. The recruitment process largely reinforces the other biased processes that lead to political activity (Brady, Schlozman, and Verba 1995).

Political inequality is, thus, embedded deeply in American society. Can the ideal of political equality be achieved? More modestly, can we move closer to that ideal? It is hard to see how. The constraint on political participation from unequal resources derives from the basic institutions in society, from differential education and differential economic position. Mobilization breaks the pattern from time to time, but the system of mobilization is also embedded in the same set of institutions, and mobilization generally reinforces the inequality of political voice. Surveys, if done well and used honestly (two significant qualifications), may help, but they can hardly change things. Greater equality in our basic institutions—greater income equality and, more important perhaps, greater educational equality—would certainly help equalize political resources. That is a tall order, and I certainly have no scheme to achieve it nor any expectation that others do either.

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