

Political Science 17.20

Introduction to American Politics

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Citizens and Politics
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2 Things Adam Berinsky Knows About Mass Opinion

1 “Most people, most of the time, do **not pay attention** to politics.”

BUT...

2 “Most people will **answer any question** you ask them.”

Case in Point

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=3gXOV_XWJck

Politics is a Sideshow in Most People's Lives

- Unlike political elites (or political scientists), **most people do not care very much about politics**. They tune in episodically, if at all.
 - Becoming politically informed is costly and provides little benefit to the individual.
- “**rational ignorance**”

Belief Systems in the Mass Public

Relative to political elites, ordinary citizens:

- have little **knowledge** of politics
- lack ideological **consistency** and constraint
 - “what goes with what”
- have many “**nonattitudes**” but few real opinions

Better-informed citizens are more similar to elites, but perhaps this is just because they know what the “right” answer is.

Public Opinion Surveys

- Surveys are how public opinion is measured, but they also influence what they are measuring.
- Surveys are unusual and intrusive.
- Logic of conversation: If someone asks you a question, the presumption is that it is one you should have an answer to.
- People often construct answers on the spot
→ “nonattitudes”

Modeling the Survey Response

Zaller's **Receive-Accept-Sample** (RAS) Model:

- 1 **Receive** political information (depends on **awareness**)
- 2 **Accept** the information (depends on **predispositions**)
- 3 **Sample** from relevant considerations (depends on **salience**)

If partisan elites (who transmit messages through the **media**) are polarized, then so will high-awareness (but not low-awareness) partisans.

The Malleability of Survey Responses

- **Framing:** Structure of political information and choices
- **Agenda-Setting:** Importance of issues
- **Priming:** Relevance/salience of different considerations
- **Elite Cues:** “What do you think of President Obama’s plan. . . ?”

Low-Information Decision-Making

- **Heuristics:** cognitively efficient decision shortcuts
 - Party
 - Incumbency
 - Group
 - Retrospective evaluation
- On-line processing
- Possibility of low-information rationality

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