

THE NATURE AND ORIGINS OF MASS OPINION

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How citizens acquire information and convert it into public opinion

The comprehensive analysis of public opinion requires attention to two phenomena: how citizens learn about matters that are for the most part beyond their immediate experience, and how they convert the information they acquire into opinions.

This chapter proposes a model of both phenomena. The model does not provide a fully accurate account of how people process information and form attitude statements. No model that is both parsimonious and testable on typical mass opinion data – the two most important constraints on my enterprise – could possibly do so. But the proposed model, as I hope to persuade the reader, does a plausible job of approximating what must actually occur, and a quite excellent job of accounting for the available survey evidence across a wide range of phenomena.

Having stated a model of the opinionation process in this chapter, I proceed in the rest of the book to test a series of propositions derived from the model. Some additional ideas will be needed to accomplish this, but they are few and incidental. All of the important features of my analysis derive from the model that is presented here.

SOME DEFINITIONS

I begin the statement of the model with definitions of primitive terms. The first is *consideration*, which is defined as any reason that might induce an individual to decide a political issue one way or the other.¹ Considerations, thus, are a compound of cognition and affect – that is, a belief concerning an object and an evaluation of the belief. “President Bush’s plan to balance the federal budget is fair to all competing interests” is an example of a consideration that might impel an individual to say, in response to a survey question, that she approves of the way President Bush is handling his job as president. The cognitive element in

¹ This term is a borrowing from Kelley (1983), who showed that individuals appear to make vote decisions in presidential elections on the basis of a net score across numerous competing “likes” and “dislikes” about the candidates, which he called “considerations.”

this consideration is information about Bush's tax plan, and the affect is the favorable evaluation of it.²

Suppose that someone sees on the TV news the image of a "bum on the street," reacts with hostility, and makes this hostility the basis of an opinion statement opposing increased government spending on the homeless. It might initially seem that this hypothetical opinion statement is based on a purely affective response rather than a blend of cognition and affect. Yet a cognitive component is clearly present: The person on the street has been seen as a "bum" rather than "a person like myself who has unfortunately lost his job." Thus, the negative evaluation depends on a particular cognitive representation of what one has seen, which is to say, a combination of cognitive and affective elements.

Although much more could be said about considerations, particularly their possible role in guiding perception, the concept in its present spare form suffices for a great many purposes, as will become apparent.³

Second, I define two types of political messages: persuasive messages and cueing messages. Persuasive messages are arguments or images providing a reason for taking a position or point of view; if accepted by an individual, they become considerations, as the term was just defined. A speech by a Democratic politician charging that "President Bush's budget plan is a sham and a delusion" is an example of a persuasive message.

Note that there is nothing in this account that implies that either political messages or the considerations that result from them must be coldly rational. On the contrary, messages may involve subtle or even subliminal images, and considerations may involve feelings or emotions. Thus, a president may seek to project a "message" of competence in his public presentations, in the hope that it will make the public feel warm or secure. If the president is cognized in this way, and if this cognitive representation generates feelings of security that positively influence how citizens evaluate the president's job performance, the feelings of security must be counted as reasons for favorably evaluating the president – that is, as considerations. I wish to underscore these points because, although the model I propose has a cognitive flavor, it is, in principle, as capable of dealing with nonrational appeals and inarticulate feelings as with other kinds of political discourse.

2 In many cases the evaluation associated with a consideration is implicit rather than explicit, as in "The Pentagon wastes a lot of money," a piece of "information" that almost everyone would accept as reflecting unfavorably on the need for more defense spending.

3 There is a temptation simply to borrow the psychological concept of a schema and use it in place of the term "consideration." Yet "schema" is not quite right for my argument. For one thing, the concept stresses cognition rather than affect. However suitable this may be in other domains of life, it is not suitable in politics, where people appear to make decisions on the basis of ideas that are affectively charged. Consideration, defined as a reason for favoring a position, is perhaps idiosyncratic, but the term has the critical advantage of combining cognition and affect. Also, consideration has an everyday meaning that is more compatible with the *political* analysis of public opinion than terms such as schema.

Cueing messages, which are the second type of message carried in elite discourse, consist of “contextual information” about the ideological or partisan implications of a persuasive message. The importance of cueing messages is that, as suggested by Converse (1964), they enable citizens to perceive relationships between the persuasive messages they receive and their political predispositions, which in turn permits them to respond critically to the persuasive messages. Thus, a Republican voter will be more likely to reject criticism of President Bush’s budget plan if she recognizes that the person making the criticism is a Democrat.

We saw a clear illustration of the importance of cueing information in the last chapter, where politically unaware hawks and doves were unable to make a partisan response to a question about aid to the Contra guerrillas in Nicaragua because they apparently lacked contextual information about who the Contras were. These same hawks and doves could, however, respond in partisan fashion to a question about combating communism in Central America because communism was a cue they understood.

THE MODEL

The model itself consists of four assertions, or axioms, about how individuals respond to political information they may encounter. Each is stated first as a general theoretical position and then elaborated and justified in more precise terms.

As will become apparent, none of the axioms is individually original, nor can it be said that any of the four axioms is a perfect representation of what occurs in the world. I hope, however, to show that the axioms, taken as a group, have some highly novel and empirically correct implications, and also that, even though not perhaps perfectly true, the axioms are quite plausible approximations of the processes that must actually occur as individuals acquire information about politics and use it to formulate statements of their political preferences.

*A1. RECEPTION AXIOM. The greater a person’s level of cognitive engagement with an issue, the more likely he or she is to be exposed to and comprehend – in a word, to receive – political messages concerning that issue.*⁴

The messages people may receive include all types: that is, persuasive messages and cueing messages.

In specifying the reception axiom in terms of cognitive engagement rather than, say, strength of feeling about an issue, the model obviously stresses the cognitive aspect of exposure to political communications. There are two reasons for this. The first is that, as indicated, the model is most centrally concerned with how individuals acquire information from the environment and convert it into opinion statements. These are essentially cognitive processes, so that affective engagement is likely to be able to affect them only insofar as it leads to

⁴ These terms derive from McGuire, 1969.

intellectual – which is to say, cognitive – engagement. Hence it is appropriate to define the model in terms of cognitive engagement.

The second reason is that, as an empirical matter, survey measures that capture cognitive engagement with politics outperform measures of affective engagement in explaining most aspects of public opinion. For example, people who score higher on tests of political knowledge are substantially more stable in their attitude reports than people who score low on political awareness (Feldman, 1989; Zaller, 1990); however, people who describe themselves as highly interested in politics, which I take as a form of affective involvement, are not significantly more stable than persons who express little political interest (Zaller, 1990: table 2).

It is interesting to note that political interest, despite its limited effect on response stability, is a strong correlate of voter turnout – slightly stronger, in fact, than political knowledge (Zaller, 1990: table 1). So, affective engagement can be important, but unless coupled with intellectual engagement, it appears to have only limited effects on opinion per se.

Although cognitive engagement is the right specification for my model, it is a cumbersome and somewhat precious phrase. Therefore, I will, through most of the analysis that follows, use a simpler phrase, namely *political attentiveness* or *political awareness*. But cognitive engagement, political attentiveness, and political awareness are meant to convey the same meaning.

In the analysis that follows, political awareness is operationally measured mainly by means of a general measure of political knowledge – that is, a person's summary score across a series of neutral, factual tests of public affairs knowledge, as discussed in the previous chapter.

Political awareness, measured in this way, is a measure of *general, chronic awareness*. As such, it does not directly test individuals' information about or attention to a particular issue at a particular time. In using this sort of measure, I will be assuming that persons who are knowledgeable about politics in general are habitually attentive to communications on most particular issues as well.

This measurement strategy is less than ideal. More narrowly focused measures of awareness – devoted exclusively, say, to intellectual engagement with foreign policy issues or race policy issues, and used exclusively in connection with reception of information concerning foreign or race policy issues – would be preferable to general awareness measures. However, such domain-specific awareness measures are rarely carried on opinion surveys and none are available for the cases I examine in this study. As a practical matter, thus, I must make do with general measures. Yet, as far as I have been able to tell from investigation of similar problems, the loss from using general rather than domain-specific awareness measures to capture exposure to elite discourse is minimal (Zaller, 1986; Price and Zaller, 1990; though see also Iyengar, 1990; see Chapter 2 and the Measures Appendix for further discussion.)

The reader should note that the Reception Axiom, A1, indicates nothing about the sources of the political communications that shape mass opinion. As

far as that axiom is concerned, political communications may originate in elite discourse, in purely personal exchanges among friends and neighbors, or in other ways. All that is claimed in A1 is that reception of politically relevant communications, whatever their origin, is positively associated with intellectual engagement with a given issue. By extension, political awareness is assumed to capture propensity for reception of political communications generally, regardless of their point of origin.

It would obviously be desirable to be able to measure exposure to interpersonal influence independently of exposure to elite discourse in the mass media. However, it is not possible to do so from the available data. Some surveys do carry measures of people's self-reported frequency of personal discussion of politics, but there is, as with measures of political awareness, no guarantee that they would capture exposure to only one type of communication.⁵

Thus, the reader should bear in mind that the assumption that it is the information carried in elite discourse, rather than personal influence or something else, which shapes mass opinion is not a part of the formal model that I am laying out in this chapter. It is, rather, an auxiliary assumption that requires independent justification, as I have sought to provide in the first part of Chapter 2 and will provide in parts of the analysis reported below. I extensively discuss this point in my closing evaluation of the book's argument in Chapters 11 and 12.

A2. RESISTANCE AXIOM. People tend to resist arguments that are inconsistent with their political predispositions, but they do so only to the extent that they possess the contextual information necessary to perceive a relationship between the message and their predispositions.

The key to resistance, in this formulation, is *information* concerning the relationship between arguments and predispositions, where the requisite information is carried in cueing messages. According to the Reception Axiom, the probability of individuals acquiring cueing information depends on their levels of awareness of each given issue. Thus, A1 and A2 together imply that the likelihood of resisting persuasive communications that are inconsistent with one's political predispositions rises with a person's level of political attentiveness. Or, to put it the other way, politically inattentive persons will often be unaware of

5 Price and I (1990) have found that, although frequency of political discussions with one's peers has a moderate bivariate relationship with the likelihood of reception of particular current news items, discussion has no impact once habitual political awareness is controlled. Even self-reported media use has little impact on measured news reception once general awareness is controlled. Neither of these findings, however, indicates anything about the sources of the news that individuals have received.

It might be suggested that if media use and frequency of political discussion were used *instead of* rather than *in addition to* general political awareness, it would be possible to distinguish their relative importance. The difficulty with this idea is that media exposure is extremely unreliably measured in typical surveys – much less reliably than the generally high alpha reliability statistics of indices of media exposure would indicate. In consequence, substitution of media use for political awareness results in dreadfully anemic results even when strong media effects are clearly present, as Price and I (1990) show. I suspect that the actual reliability of self-reported frequencies of political discussion would, if carefully investigated, prove low as well.

the implications of the persuasive communications they encounter, and so often end up “mistakenly” accepting them.

This postulate makes no allowance for citizens to think, reason, or deliberate about politics: If citizens are well informed, they react mechanically to political ideas on the basis of external cues about their partisan implications, and if they are too poorly informed to be aware of these cues, they tend to uncritically accept whatever ideas they encounter.⁶

As normatively unappealing as this implication of the model may be, it is consistent with a large body of theory and research concerning political persuasion. Philip Converse, the leading theorist of mass opinion, maintains that few people reason for themselves about how political ideas relate to one another. Rather, to the extent that individuals respond critically to the political ideas they encounter, they rely on contextual information from elites about how different ideas “go together” and thereby “constrain” one another (Converse, 1964). Although he does not say so, the contextual information that Converse describes would surely include the particular groups or leaders who favor or oppose an idea.

A central point in Converse’s analysis is that awareness of contextual information is likely to depend on general levels of political awareness. Hence, only people attaining fairly high levels of awareness are likely to respond to communications in a manner that is “constrained” by their values.

The psychological literature on opinion change lends great support to the notion that individuals typically fail to reason for themselves about the persuasive communications they encounter. Instead, people rely on cues about the “source” of a message in deciding what to think of it. Reviewing this evidence in an influential 1969 article, William McGuire wrote:

The given message is judged as fairer, more factual, more thoroughly documented, its conclusion following more validly from its premises, and even more grammatical, when it is ascribed to a high- as opposed to a low-credibility source. (p. 198)

Although the studies McGuire cites do not necessarily involve political sources that are Democrat or Republican, or liberal or conservative, they ought to generalize to these kinds of sources (see, for example, Belknap and Campbell, 1951–2; Mueller, 1973; Price, 1989).

McGuire goes on to note that people do not seem to *learn* more from credible sources; they simply tend to accept their opinion leadership more readily. This pattern, he continues,

suggests again that the receiver can be regarded as a lazy organism who tries to master the message contents only when it is absolutely necessary to make a decision. When the purported source is clearly positively or negatively valenced, he uses this information as a cue to accept or reject the message’s conclusions without really absorbing the arguments used.

⁶ As operationalized below, the model will not require that inattentive citizens accept *all* ideas they encounter; it requires only that they be more accepting than highly aware persons, and that they not be able to respond selectively to issues on the basis of their predispositions. However, the empirically estimated acceptance rates (given exposure) of uninformed people turn out to be very high; see Figures 7.4 and 10.1.

Recent research has sketched a somewhat more encouraging picture of the critical capabilities of the “receiver.” For example, Rhine and Severance (1970) have found that college students pay no attention at all to credibility of the source when the topic of the message is one that engages their interest, which in this case was whether college tuition should be raised. Source effects, these researchers found, were limited to non-“ego-involving” issues, such as how much land should be set aside for parks in a distant community.

Most recently, the work of Chaiken (1980) and Petty and Cacioppo (1986) has provided clear support for the view that individuals will, under certain circumstances, entirely ignore such factors as “source credibility” and instead base their attitudes on the quality of the persuasive information they have been given. A typical Petty and Cacioppo experiment runs like this: Underclass college students are presented with persuasive arguments on a topic of potentially great interest to them – whether senior comprehensive exams should be a requirement for graduation. This is an idea that, needless to say, undergraduates are predisposed to resist. Half the students are exposed to “strong” arguments for comprehensive exams, such as the example of a university that instituted such exams and then found that the starting salaries of its graduates rose \$4,000 over a two-year period, and the argument that law schools give preference to students from schools having the senior exam requirement. The other half of the students are given “weak” arguments, such as the arguments that many colleges are considering the exams, so the school could be at the forefront of a national trend, and that graduate students, who must take comprehensive exams, feel it is only fair that undergraduates should have to take them too. In each of these conditions, half the students are told that the proposal is to institute the new requirement the following year, so that it would apply to them (“high-involvement” condition) and half are told that the requirement is being considered for possible adoption in ten years (“low-involvement” condition). Finally, half the students are told that the source of the arguments they are getting is a Princeton professor (a “high-credibility” source) and half are told that the arguments have been taken from the report of a local high school class (a “low-credibility” source). The experimental design, thus, is two message types \times two involvement conditions \times two source types.

The results are as follows: Low-involvement students pay some attention to the quality of the arguments but are most strongly affected by the credibility of the sources advocating them; hence they are favorable toward comprehensive exams only when the source advocating them is a Princeton professor. High-involvement students, by contrast, pay no attention to source credentials, but are powerfully influenced by the strength of the arguments. Thus, they are very favorable to senior comprehensive exams when the arguments for them have been good and strongly negative otherwise. Petty and Cacioppo are able to show, in addition, that the different reactions of the high- and low-involvement students are due precisely to the fact that the former have thought more extensively about the arguments being made.

One wishes one could be confident that the general public were as good at detecting weak arguments as were Petty and Cacioppo's "high-involvement" college students. But the reasons for doubt are great.

First, the weak arguments used in Petty and Cacioppo's experiments were extremely weak, sometimes comically so. It took systematic effort to develop such weak but still coherent arguments, and political persuaders in real life cannot be expected to take similar pains. Bad as the arguments of many politicians may be, politicians (and their media consultants) try to be persuasive. In cases of real-life political controversy, citizens are likely to face two sets of opposing arguments that, when compared to those of a typical Petty and Cacioppo experiment, will all be "strong."

Second, most politics, at least in the contemporary United States, is notoriously low key and uninvolved. The stakes are theoretically high, but people find it hard to stay interested. (The evidence on this point was reviewed in Chapter 2.) In such "low-involvement" conditions, Petty and Cacioppo's work indicates that most people engage in "peripheral" message processing, that is, processing that ignores the intrinsic quality of arguments and uses superficial cues such as source credibility as the basis for accepting or rejecting messages.

Third, the students in the Petty and Cacioppo experiments were judging issues that were rooted in their everyday experiences. (Other issues Petty and Cacioppo use are tuition increases and liberalization of dormitory visiting hours.) With respect to issues like these, virtually all students are fully capable, without any particular past attention to the issues, of responding in the manner of informed experts. This condition does not even remotely hold for most political issues, where the information and judgment necessary to reach reliable conclusions is beyond the direct experience of even the most attentive persons.

Thus, the conditions that make possible Petty and Cacioppo's encouraging findings – weak arguments, and "receivers" who are both involved in and well-informed about the issue at hand – are simply not present in typical situations of mass persuasion. On the contrary, real-world conditions, according to the work of Petty and Cacioppo and that of others, encourage reliance on peripheral cues, such as whether the person advocating a position is liberal or conservative, a union leader or a priest, or whatever (Belknap and Campbell, 1951–2; Campbell et al., 1960; Key, 1961; Mueller, 1973; Price, 1989; Gerber and Jackson, 1990; Pollock, Lisle, and Vittes, 1991; Page and Shapiro, in press).

There is, then, solid empirical support for the assumption that citizens normally respond to new information on the basis of external cues concerning the implications of that information for their values and other predispositions, provided that, as Converse emphasizes, they are sufficiently attentive to politics to have learned the cues.

Having stated a strong argument for why political awareness should be associated with resistance to persuasion, let me now state an equally strong caveat: The argument applies only to cases in which the contextual information necessary to evaluate an issue in light of one's predispositions is, for one reason or

another, obscure. Thus, as we saw in Chapter 2, steadfast anticommunists were quite able to state opinions consistent with their predispositions when they were asked about “stopping communism” in Central America. It was only when they were asked about “aid to the Contras,” an obscure reference, that they had trouble. To take another example, one would expect strong age-related differences, independent of political awareness, in responses to a question about taxing social security benefits. The reason is that virtually everyone, even the least politically aware, would possess the contextual information necessary to answer this question in relation to their predispositions, in this case, nearness to retirement age.

The extent to which contextual information is obscure may depend either on the nature of the issue – race, as Converse pointed out, is one area in which most people can understand what is at stake – or on the way a question is phrased, as in the example of aid to the Contras.

Generally speaking, the more abstract the link between a predisposition and a related policy issue, the greater the amount or obscurity of knowledge necessary to perceive the linkage, or the more complicated the chain of reasoning involved, the more important political awareness is likely to be in regulating individual responses to political communications on that issue. Conversely, the more simple and direct the link between a predisposition and an issue, the less important awareness is likely to be in regulating responses to political communications on that issue.

Although it is important to note that awareness can be expected to enhance resistance to persuasion only when the full significance of the issue or survey question is to some degree obscure, this qualification by no means robs the resistance axiom of its bite. Obscurity, in the sense I have indicated, is extremely common in politics.

A3. ACCESSIBILITY AXIOM. The more recently a consideration has been called to mind or thought about, the less time it takes to retrieve that consideration or related considerations from memory and bring them to the top of the head for use.

Conversely, the longer it has been since a consideration or related idea has been activated, the less likely it is to be accessible at the top of the head; in the limit, a long unused set of considerations may be completely inaccessible, which is to say, forgotten.

This axiom appropriates for use in the model one of the best-established empirical regularities in cognitive psychology. General support for the basic idea is overwhelming and, as far as I can tell, undisputed. When an idea or concept has been recently used, seen, heard, or indirectly referenced, it is significantly more likely to be available for reuse than if it has not been recently activated (for reviews, see Higgins and King, 1981; Wyer and Srull, 1989).

Note, however, an element of ambiguity in this axiom. Although specifying that use of one consideration can increase the accessibility of related considerations, it says nothing about what it means for different considerations to be re-

lated. I am therefore implicitly relying on common understanding to determine when considerations are related to one another.

A4. *RESPONSE AXIOM. Individuals answer survey questions by averaging across the considerations that are immediately salient or accessible to them.*

This axiom, which completes the statement of my proposed model, implies that persons who have been asked a survey question do not normally canvass their minds for all considerations relevant to the given issue; rather, they answer the question on the basis of whatever considerations are accessible “at the top of the head.” In some cases, only a single consideration may be readily accessible, in which case individuals answer on the basis of that consideration; in other cases, two or more considerations may come quickly to mind, in which case people answer by averaging across accessible considerations.

An important feature of the Response Axiom is that it permits different people to respond to issue questions on the basis of different considerations – one, for example, emphasizing ideological concerns, another gut-level likes and dislikes, and yet another self-interest. This renders the model consistent with a growing literature indicating that such interpersonal heterogeneity is quite common (Graber, 1984; Rivers, 1988; Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock, 1991; Hollis, 1991).

Many readers will suspect that the top-of-the-head Response Axiom is too simple – as, indeed, it surely is. Psychologists working with data from laboratory studies and from experimentally controlled surveys have developed more complex and hence presumably more realistic models of how individuals process information and reach decisions.

For example, Tourangeau and Rasinski (1988) have proposed a four-stage model in which individuals (1) interpret the question to determine what the issue before them really is, (2) canvass their minds for relevant thoughts, (3) integrate their thoughts into a coherent opinion, and (4) map that opinion onto the response options available in the question. Because features of the questionnaire can affect each of these steps, the questionnaire also affects what gets reported as public opinion.

Although the Tourangeau and Rasinski model is still fairly simple, it may nonetheless be too complex for use in the context of mass opinion survey data. I say this because it is quite consistent with the evidence that Tourangeau and Rasinski cite that their four-stage process has only one important step: the retrieval from memory of a dominant consideration. So, for example, a conservative who happens to think about a government services question in terms of “welfare cheats” may already have done all he needs to do in the way of canvassing his mind for beliefs, integrating them into a coherent opinion, and mapping the opinion onto the given response options. Tourangeau and Rasinski are aware of their limited ability to distinguish empirically the steps in their model with survey data and do what they can to combat it. But my point remains that complex models may have only limited utility for general analyses of public opinion.

Models that are still more complex, such as the forty-three-postulate information-processing model proposed by Wyer and Srull (1989), are even more dubious in the context of public opinion data. Analysts of mass opinion can profitably use such models for heuristic guidance in devising their models, but, in the end, it is necessary to make radical simplifications if the purpose is to engage in the rigorous analysis of typical public opinion data.

If there is a threat to my simplified top-of-the-head Response Axiom, it comes from recent psychological studies of “on-line” information processing. The argument here is that people do not form their attitude statements from ideas accessible at the moment of response but instead use a “judgment operator” to continuously update their attitudes as they acquire new information; people are said to store these updated attitudes in memory and retrieve them as required by a given situation, including interview situations (Hastie and Park, 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh, 1989).

Although a fair amount of evidence supports the on-line model, there are strong reasons for doubting that it holds generally within the domain of political attitudes. These reasons are best discussed after the evidence supporting my model has been presented. For the moment, however, I briefly note two of the most important. The first is that it is wildly unrealistic to expect citizens to use each piece of incoming information to update all of the “attitudes” to which it might be relevant. Thus, for example, a news story about the suffering of homeless people would, in the idealized world of on-line processing, require updates of attitudes toward the welfare system, the value of big government, the efficiency of capitalism, the president’s attempts to trim welfare spending, voluntary charity, the American way of life, among others – which is to say, many more subjects that a person could possibly rethink at the moment of encountering each new piece of political information. The second reason for doubting the applicability of the on-line model to political attitudes is that this model, with its notion that attitudes are simply “retrieved” from memory and reported to the inquiring interviewer, is quite obviously just a restatement of the conventional “true attitude” model, a model that, as I have been at pains to show, is simply not capable of accommodating the available evidence on the nature of mass political attitudes.

The survey responses that people make within the proposed model may reasonably be described as attitudes or opinions, in that they represent people’s true feelings at the moment of answering a given survey question; they could not, however, be described as “true attitudes,” in the technical sense of the term, because survey responses are not assumed to represent anything more than a single aspect of people’s feelings toward a given attitude object.

Perhaps the most apt description of a survey response within the proposed model is “opinion statement.” This term implies that the expression of opinion is genuine without also implying that it either represents prior reflection or is destined for a long half-life. The phrase “attitude report” has similar virtues.

Opinion statements, as conceived in my four-axiom model, are the outcome of a process in which people *receive* new information, decide whether to *accept* it, and then *sample* at the moment of answering questions. For convenience, therefore, I will refer to this process as the Receive-Accept-Sample, or RAS, Model.

HOW THE MODEL IS USED IN THIS BOOK

The model I have outlined consists of four very general claims about how people acquire information from the political environment (in the form of persuasive arguments and cues) and transform that information into survey responses. In the remainder of the book, I use these axioms to explore and explain numerous aspects of mass opinion. In particular, I will use the axioms to explain the distributions of mass opinion that may be expected to occur in various kinds of political environments – for example, a political environment in which people are exposed to two equally intense streams of competing liberal and conservative messages on a given issue; a political environment in which most of the messages one-sidedly favor a given issue; and an environment in which the proportions of liberal and conservative messages are changing, thereby producing attitude change in the mass public. The four axioms, standing by themselves, have limited analytical utility; but they come to life under these various configurations of the flow of political information.

The method of the book, then, is to develop the deductive implications of the four basic axioms for a given, highly specific set of conditions; review evidence indicating whether or not these implications are empirically correct; and present new evidence as necessary and possible to resolve outstanding empirical questions.

At a few points in the analysis, it will be necessary to supplement the four axioms in nonfundamental ways. For example, I will need in Chapter 7 to stipulate a functional form for the relationship between political awareness and reception of political messages. More and less complicated operational models will also be built from the axioms at various points in the book, depending on the strength of the data available to test the models. But no significant new substantive claims about public opinion will be introduced. The burden of the book will be to show how various aspects of public opinion, some well-established and some novel, can be deduced from the four axioms, given particular information flows – that is, particular streams of liberal and conservative communications – in the political environment.

The argument to be made from the RAS model may be previewed as follows. It follows from the Response Axiom that the probability that a person will support or oppose a given policy depends on the mix of positive and negative considerations available in the person's mind at the moment of answering a question about it. If, for the moment, we overlook the probability of nonresponse (which occurs when no considerations are immediately salient in memory), and assume

also that every consideration a person has internalized is as likely to be sampled as any other, then the probability of a liberal response by a given person is

$$Prob(\text{Liberal response}) = \frac{L}{L + C}$$

where L and C refer to the number of liberal and conservative considerations available in the person's mind. (I reiterate that here, as elsewhere in this book, liberal and conservative are simply *labels* for the directional thrust of ideas; a person may use a liberal consideration as the basis for a liberal response even though she is not, in any deeper sense, "a liberal.")

The balance of liberal and conservative considerations in people's minds depends on both society-level and individual-level variables. The key societal variables are the intensities of liberal and conservative information flows in the political environment with respect to a given issue. The key individual variables are political awareness and political predispositions. More aware persons will be exposed to more political communications (via the Reception Axiom) but will be more selective in deciding which communications to internalize as considerations (via the Resistance Axiom). Thus, politically aware citizens will tend to fill their minds with large numbers of considerations, and these considerations will tend to be relatively consistent with one another and with the citizens' predispositions. Less aware persons will internalize fewer considerations and will be less consistent in doing so. As a result, more aware people will be more likely to be able to state opinions, and more likely to state opinions that are ideologically consistent with their predispositions.

Changes in the relative intensity of liberal and conservative communications on an issue will produce changes in the kinds of considerations people form, which will in turn produce changes in the opinion statements they make. One of the things that gives the RAS model its strength is its ability to forecast that different segments of the public will change their attitudes in different amounts and even different directions, depending on their political awareness, their political values, and the particular changes in information flow that have occurred.

Thus, the four basic postulates of the sampling model, unprepossessing as they are, entail quite definite claims about how public opinion forms and changes, as we will now begin to see.