Introduction

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This volume emerges from three general sources: demands for enhanced citizen inputs to the political process; models of democratic processes; and survey research on public policy. Here, I offer a comment on each.¹

DEMANDS FOR ENHANCED CITIZEN INPUTS TO THE POLITICAL PROCESS

The late 1960s saw dramatic increases on many political systems for enhanced citizen inputs. The urban disorders involving Blacks in many American cities and student and worker demonstrations in Europe received most publicity. In their wake have come numerous efforts to increase citizen inputs. Decentralization and increased citizen participation in neighborhood governments and places of work were frequent demands. To respond, various institutional structures along these lines were tried, ranging from citizen boards for Model Cities to little city halls. By the early 1970s, many public officials were convinced that efforts at increasing direct citizen participation had not been effective. Some turned to surveys of citizens as an alternative (indeed one accepted by certain American federal agencies as a necessary component for grant applications by local agencies). Evaluations of social programs also often include citizen surveys. What do social scientists have to contribute to this effort?

MODELS OF DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES

Without inordinate simplification, two general approaches to modeling democratic processes may be distinguished. The two have quite different implications for citizen inputs. The first goes under such names as group theory, pluralism, or the elitist theory of democracy. It emerges
from such writers as A. Bentley, J. Schumpeter, V.O. Key, and R.A. Dahl. There are many variations, but most suggest that few individual citizens are sufficiently interested in specific public issues to become informed enough to take a clear position. Hence it is 'rational' for a citizen to support a political leader or a union or a party label that he has came to trust, and to leave specific issues and tactics to other actors. This approach cautions us to the demands which can be made on citizens concerning specific issues. Insofar as surveys of the general public are undertaken, this approach suggests they might deal with quite broad matters such as support for political candidates or parties. At the local level, one might interview leaders, or ask citizens about general support for programs like Model Cities, if not specific policies. If one does question citizens about specific policy issues, they should concern only those issues about which the citizen is reasonably certain to be well informed: personal experience with police officials or victimization by criminals, how often garbage collectors come by, and so forth.

The second general approach to modeling democratic processes is the populist or economic model of democracy. Recent advocates include A. Downs, J.M. Buchanan, and G. Tullock. These three and many others have sought to conceive of the political system as analogous to a pure market economy. Citizens then become the only sovereigns and it is their preferences which competing candidates for public office seek to implement. If candidates (political entrepreneurs) are successful, they will deliver public policies with just as invisible a hand as the pure market entrepreneur delivers private goods. Hence, intermediary groups such as political parties, pressure groups, unions, etc. are relegated to a largely subordinate role, certainly by contrast with the role they play in group theories.

The group theory approach has been the dominant tradition in American political analysis since the Second World War. But since the late 1960s, the populist approach has been gaining ground. If group theories were often less conceptually systematic, they were firmly grounded in empirical studies (of national interest groups, local decision-making, etc). By contrast, the populist theories have been highly abstract, often mathematically rigorous, but sadly lacking in empirical evidence. This has recently been changing.

**SURVEY RESEARCH ON PUBLIC POLICY**

Since the 1930s, survey research on political questions has mushroomed. But most surveys by Roper or Gallup, as well as social
scientists, have focused on support for political parties, individual candidates, or quite general issues, such as confidence in the president. There has been very little work addressed to specific public policies, such as should we increase national health insurance, or how satisfied are you with local police protection? This lack of work is not without cause. Probably the leading statement on these matters was long that of P.M. Converse\(^2\) whose analysis of survey questions concerning public policies suggested that their fluctuations were so great - largely due to citizen information - that detailed study of specific policy issues was generally unfeasible in surveys administered to the general public. More recent work has suggested that citizen information and interest in public policies has increased since Converse and others reached their conclusions.\(^3\) But just how far one can go, just how much the survey analyst may legitimately ask of the general public, remains very much an issue of debate. Much depends on the context and format of the questions, recent public discussion, and related situational issues. In the last few years, surveys of citizen preference, undertaken to help inform public policy, have grown dramatically. Most have simply ignored the Converse-type criticisms, and pushed ahead. For example, the State of North Carolina has recently undertaken a survey of citizen spending preferences using budget pies. This activity has grown sufficiently large in volume and policy import to demand assessment. Such is our purpose.

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This volume grows out of a session on Preference Revelation for Public Goods, held at the Public Choice Society meeting in Chicago, 3-5 April 1975. Presented at the session were draft versions of the papers by Tideman, Hoffman, and Rothenberg, as well as two papers that appear elsewhere.\(^4\) Comments by Hatry and Ostrom at the session later grew into their papers found here.

The Public Choice Society is a leading forum for the application of economic analyses to political phenomena. This partially accounts for the attention in this volume to such questions. Unlike much earlier work in the public choice tradition, however, the papers here show direct concern for assessing general models and concepts using systematic evidence. In the process, some fundamental questions are raised about basic assumptions and approaches in the 'economic theory of democracy'. Several differences of view distinguish the contributors. Nevertheless many of the results complement one another and point
in similar directions.

It would be false modesty not to suggest that, taken together, these papers probably represent the most serious and detailed assessment to date of the uses and limitations of citizen surveys of urban public policy.

The papers fall into four groups. The first group, including those by Clark, Tideman, and Rothenberg, pose general questions about how to assess and measure citizen preferences for public goods.

Clark considers four 'modes' of decision-making — majority rule in selecting representatives, referenda, political participation and citizen surveys. The paper differs from other efforts at assessing such modes in the range of criteria applied: economic efficiency, determinateness, changes in information and tastes, preference structures, intensity of preferences, strategic behavior, decision-making costs, responsiveness to leadership qualities. Building on several years of experience of working with the demanding assumptions of abstract preference models, the paper reminds us of many apparently forgotten strengths of participation and representative government.

Tideman, like Clark, reviews several modes of collective decision-making, but the criteria he emphasizes are economic efficiency, equality, stability, and workability. The modes considered include majority rule, but the paper is especially valuable in its assessment of a wide range of additional modes of collective decision-making. Many of these are quite complex schemes never tried in practice, but which collective choice theorists have invented better to approximate (most often) economic efficiency and to minimize strategy. Many theoretical considerations that led to the surveys with budget pies in later papers are clearly presented here.

Rothenburg focuses on the little-discussed issue of using semi-homogeneous subgroups of citizens. He is critical of such a political cultural approach, instead arguing in favor of analyzing discrete individuals. His analysis leads to a quite different result from Curry's considerations of a similar problem.

The second section includes papers by Hoffman and Curry which test and extend median preference theories. Both analyze survey data about citizen demands for spending on a range of urban public policies. Both start from a neo-Downsean perspective; neither finds convincing support for this perspective.

Hoffman's central hypothesis is that if local political leaders follow a median preference strategy, then citizen preferences should be equally divided between those who prefer more and those who prefer less
spending. Using data from ten American cities, he finds that citizens quite consistently prefer more services than they are receiving. But they also report that taxes are too high. These results hold even when several adjustments are added for income, race, political participation, etc.

Curry extends a neo-Downsean model to include benefits that individuals receive by virtue of group membership. He then analyzes citizen data for Boston to see how well demands for public services can be explained by membership in ethnic and other groups. Although several measures of group membership are statistically significant, the regression results show that a wide range of variables explain citizen policy preferences only very minimally. In particular, he finds that neither the Irish nor Blacks stand out, in contrast to earlier results of Clark and Hoffman which showed these two groups to be quite distinctive supporters of public expenditure.

The two most obvious interpretations for these results of Hoffman and Curry seem to be: (1) citizen preferences are much less structured than many neo-Downsean interpretations suggest; and/or (2) the specific survey formats were too crude to elicit information of the sort called for by the abstract preference theories.

The third group of papers, by McIver and Ostrom and Scott, speak directly to the survey format question. Both employed budget pie survey formats with large samples of citizens. Both included budget pies for their presumed theoretical superiority to simpler questionnaire formats. But both present results which raise serious questions about the budget pie format.

McIver and Ostrom summarize results from a survey of 1401 citizens in the St Louis metropolitan area which included a budget pie for three police services. They analyzed the data in several ingenious ways. Responses to an open-ended question asked what one improvement should be made with money from a federal or state grant for law enforcement. Resulting allocations hardly correlated with budget pie responses. Actual expenditure allocations by each citizen’s police department were then compared with budget pie results — again correlations were minimal, although significant for higher SES neighborhoods. Next, seven items tapping evaluations of the police in terms of honesty, courtesy, etc. were correlated with the budget pie responses; correlations were modest, although often statistically significant. Finally, to assess strategic response patterns, four groups were examined, classified by jurisdiction size and level of information about the police. As hypothesized, citizens in larger jurisdictions and
with more information seemed to respond more strategically.

Scott’s work provides the most direct effort at methodological comparison of budget pies with other formats. He administered questions about urban public services (street repair, etc.) to 1028 citizens in the Los Angeles area. The same basic questions were repeated using four distinct formats: a budget pie, card sort, ordinal ranking, and self-anchoring scale. The last three methods generated fairly high (about 0.6) intercorrelations, and meaningful scales. But these three methods correlated insignificantly with the budget pie.

McIver and Ostrom report difficulty in using the budget pie format with lower status respondents; 21 per cent of their sample did not complete the budget pie properly, although only 4 per cent of Scott’s respondents refused or had no opinion.

The last paper confronts several issues in the use of surveys for public policy. Although all the papers have suggestions about how and where different types of surveys are appropriate in policy making, Hatry and Blair comment directly from their experiences in helping local public officials use citizen surveys. Their judicious remarks about the uses and limits of surveys deserve serious attention. They emphasize the value of surveys for specific, realistic questions about which the citizen is knowledgeable and interested. They list several examples (and include more detail in related publications). Cost estimates are also presented. Unlike most other papers, they directly address the impacts that surveys may have on local officials and citizens. In particular, they consider it a ‘cop out’ for local officials to ask citizens about general policy priorities (as is done with most budget pies). The issues are simply so complex, they suggest, that ‘an informed response requires a knowledge of the costs and benefits . . . which the average citizen has little likelihood of having’. Their remarks close the volume on a note of caution similar to that with which Clark opened it.
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