PUBLIC OPINION AND AMERICAN DEMOCRACY. By V. O. Key, Jr.* New
   York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961. Pp. xxxiii, 566. $7.50.

I

It is a brave man who will write almost 600 pages on the subject of public
opinion. Since at least the time of Plato, political philosophers have had
things to say on the mind and role of the public. Aristotle, Machiavelli, Rous-
seau, Burke, Hegel, Tocqueville, Marx, Mill—all these and countless lesser
writers have theorized on the relation between attitudes and behavior in the
world of politics. For this reason, if for no other, many commentators are
tempted to say that the principles have been laid down, and that our knowledge
in this area is now a matter of record.

Why then does V. O. Key, a professor of government at Harvard and
America's foremost political scientist, enter the list? Several reasons, all of
them related, may be suggested. To begin with, the great political philosophers
were not empiricists. Their understanding of the public and its opinions was
highly speculative: a Hegel or a Mill would sit in the quietude of his study and
write away, assuming all the while that his random observations of reality
were accurate. While Hegel, Mill and the rest were sophisticated gentlemen
and doubtless kept their eyes and ears open, they had never actually studied
the public of which they wrote systematically. The result was that they were
usually inaccurate, sometimes flatly wrong, in their descriptions. Brilliantly
wrong—Rousseau's *General Will* is a good case in point— but wrong never-
theless. The point is that they could provide no evidence to support their
generalizations. Machiavelli might allude to the experience of classical antiqu-
ity or of the Italy he knew; Marx might cite the Blue Books or the Civil War
in France. In these instances, however, facts were used for illustrative pur-
poses, to make more graphic arguments that were preconceived in the mind of
the author. Everyone employs facts in the course of argumentation. Neverthe-
less, the use of facts as evidence, on one hand, as opposed to their use as
illustrations on the other, is a distinction that need not be belabored.

Moreover, the traditional theorists were chiefly concerned with dilating on
the proper role and characteristics of public opinion in the good society. Vir-
tually all the political philosophers of Western heritage feared the public.
Their view of the common man, regarded collectively, was as a mass or even
a mob. The public was intemperate, irrational, arrogant, and as often as not
revolutionary. Given the opportunity, the populace would overwhelm their
betters and would destroy the edifices of liberty and civility. Hence not simply
Plato and Aristotle, but conservatives like Burke and liberals like Mill sought
to discover ways to control the public and channel its passions into harmless
tributaries. The good public in the good society would be quiescent and
deferential. This prescription continues to have appeal. Many American
writers, most notably Walter Lippmann, have suggested that if we must have

---

*Professor of Government, Harvard University.

democracy it should be based on a public that acknowledges its shortcomings and is willing to defer to men of superior endowments.

Yet if Western political philosophy is, in its major outlines, derived from an ill-informed assessment of the facts of political life, the entire corpus of that philosophy is suspect. It may be a coherent and consistent system, but it prescribes for a reality that does not exist and may never have existed in the past. It must therefore be asked of a Walter Lippman, no less than of a Hegel or a Tocqueville, that they produce their credentials. They must demonstrate that the public of which they speak has been discovered, described, and explained in accord with rules of the empirical method.

This is V. O. Key's contribution. His analysis is based not simply on facts but on facts that may properly be called evidence. He relies throughout on data from nationwide sample surveys that have been conducted over the past thirty years. While he occasionally uses the Roper and Gallup returns, he chiefly employs the results of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center studies. These studies, made during election campaigns, ask an elaborate array of questions that seek to uncover a wide range of political opinions and attitudes. Survey data may be classed as evidence for one straight forward reason: it is replicable. A national survey will select its sample, phrase its questions, and train its interviewers according to the methods that are both known and accepted by the social science profession. Those who conduct a survey of this kind are obliged to make public their methodology and to defend it, if necessary, before the bar of their fraternity. The assumption is that if others embarked on a similar project, using the same methods, they would come up with fairly much the same results. And this, after all, is the basis of any science. For on the occasions when studies have been replicated the results have been largely comparable.[1] If Key's reliance on surveys is to be criticized, it should not be on the ground that the data they produce from samples are unrepresentative.

The bulk of the book is an inventory of the characteristics of public opinion. Part I deals with "patterns of distribution" and discusses consensus, conflict, and concentration. Key shows how, in alternative circumstances, there is a variety in types of agreement and disagreement on political issues. His major observation is that consensus rests more on apathy and inertia than on a consciously held agreement on principles within the population. Part II discusses the "structural distribution" of public opinion in America. Here attention is paid to regional, occupational, and class distinctions as related to political outlook. In addition, he contrasts those who are politically active with

---

1. In 1954 Samuel Stouffer directed a nationwide survey on public attitudes towards communism and civil liberties. His sample consisted of slightly under 5000 citizens, half of whom were interviewed by the American Institute of Public Opinion and the other half by the National Opinion Research Center. Both organizations used the same questionnaire. The aggregate responses received by the AIPO and NORC interviewers were remarkably similar. STOUFFER, COMMUNISM, CONFORMITY, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES 31, 34, 37, 42, 52 (1955).

those who are not. There is consideration of the relation between opinions on various subjects, demonstrating that "liberalism" and "conservatism" have limited utility as concepts because individuals often hold views that are contradictory in terms of the dictates of those ideologies. Part III has to do with the "properties" of public opinion, and here the chief categories are intensity, stability, and latency. Once again an inventory is made of the various forms to be encountered: The occasions when opinions are intensely held, the occasions when there is response to change in the real world, the occasions when opinions that were previously delitescent are brought to the surface. The existence of these characteristics and their several manifestations are supported by survey data throughout.

Part IV turns to the "formation" of public opinion, and here, too, Key inventories the forces at work. The influence of family, of formal education, and of the mass media are all assessed. It is shown that all these institutions and processes play a part, although it cannot be said how much of a role each one plays. It may be suggested, for example, that the attitudes instilled during youth are more significant than those that result from later exposure to the mass media. At the same time it must be granted that most individuals change at least some of their opinions as they grow older, so it is not clear what are the most operative factors in the formation process. Part V deals with the "linkage" between public opinion and the institutions of government. In this section Key indicates how opinions are transmitted through voting, the parties, elected representatives, and pressure groups. The effects of opinion on officialdom is analyzed into components, once more showing that the public is influential in different degrees in different circumstances.

The last part of the book is a 24-page essay on the relations between the leaders and the led in a democratic society. While in earlier sections Key discusses the role of leadership from time to time, it is in the final part that he shows that its quality is his foremost philosophical concern. If one were to ask the question—What does Key find to be the major shortcoming in contemporary American politics?—the answer is that our leaders are not bringing out the best in their followings. Key's assumptions are Jeffersonian, that the public is potentially rational and responsible. If the data in the foregoing sections of the book appear at times to belie such a view, the answer is that the public must be given a chance to show its virtues. And the obligation rests not on an identifiable class of leaders so much as it does on intelligent and active citizens in the middle levels of society who know their neighbors and who can guide them along the paths of reason and moderation.

II

How do we discover what is on—or in—the public's mind? The most candid way is to go out and ask a sample of citizens some questions and then tabulate their answers. Common sense might tell us, for example, that most people favor some kind of government intervention in providing medical services. A survey would pose a uniform question—"Should the government help people

get doctors and hospital care at low cost?"—to several hundred or thousand individuals.[2] What would be secured would be not a vague speculation about what "most people" favor, but precise statistical figures on the percentages favoring and opposing such a course of action. Furthemore, those figures can be cross-tabulated with information on the occupation, education, residence, and so forth of the respondents, thus giving us insights into the variations in opinion among social groups. Nevertheless, a haunting question remains: Are the answers that people give to survey questions what we really want to call their opinions? The problem is not that individuals lie to interviewers. It is rather that they usually have on their minds things that are quite different from the subjects they are asked about in the course of surveys. This is brought out most vividly in many of Key's footnotes. In these he quotes respondents' off-the-cuff comments, the remarks they added after they gave their answers to the set questions. These addenda followed an inquiry about government civil rights policy:

> "I've been drove out of three homes by colored people. They swarmed all about me." (Detroit housewife)
> "Sometimes they make more money than white people. White people need jobs first." (Wife of Missouri auto mechanic)
> "They can shift for themselves pretty well. The government doesn't support any other race. Why should they support them?" (Michigan salesman)
> "I think they ought to be shipped back where they came from." (Wife of an Idaho truck driver) [3]

Key has several dozen footnotes containing reports of comments such as these and they make some of the most fascinating reading in his book. For these quotations provide a sense of the attitudes, of the underlying frame of mind, that produce the one- or two-word answers to the standard survey questions. To be sure, these more extended comments can be coded, categorized, and tabulated statisically. There can be no real indications, however, as to how the different categories of attitudes are distributed among the population. For we are, in the above cases, dealing with resentments, insecurities, and anxieties. These fears are real, but our understanding of them is impaired once they are catalogued and forced into statistical tables. That Key relegates these quotations to footnotes is itself significant. Nor does he attempt to suggest that the quoted truck driver's wife is typical of truck drivers in general or that the Michigan salesman is typical of Michiganders. Key also realizes the difficulties in coping with the problem of measuring intensity of feeling. In survey research, how intensely an individual holds an opinion can only be evaluated in a hypothetical sense. An interviewer can ask a respondent how he would react *if* a Negro moved onto his block, but how that person will behave *when* a Negro moves in may be quite different.

---

2. Pp. 58-59, 125-26, 170, 188, 218, 223, 268-69.
3. P. 225 n.4.

The question of how individuals come to hold the opinions and attitudes they do is an old one in social science. After discussing the role of formal education, Key concludes:

> While it is plain that education significantly shapes politically relevant attitudes, it must be conceded that isolation of the effects of the school system from other influences forming political man is not readily accomplished. Intensive studies in life histories of individuals would permit more confident assignment of weights to the factors of family, education, occupational interests, social status, and other such influences.[4]

It is certainly clear that more studies are needed on this as on other problems. But what will they tell us about the relative influence of the various forces at work on individuals? Key speaks of the "assignment of weights" to the relevant factors. This means devising a numerical weighting scheme so that we can say, for example, that family influence is three times more important than education, or that occupation is half as significant as social status. The cat has yet to be belled. The reason is that it takes a rare social scientist to draw up such a scheme.[5] For he will most assuredly be set upon by his colleagues who will want to know the empirical basis for his particular weights. If he gives economic factors too high an influence, for example, he will be called a Marxist and will be accused of introducing a subjective ideology into his research. Indeed, no matter how he distributes the weighting he will be open to attack from every angle and will find few in his profession willing to come to his defense.

What emerges is a sociological agnosticism. The great fear of social science is to be found wrong. Thus generalizations are hedged with qualifying phrases like "tends to" and "for the most part" and "by and large." There is also a retreat from causal analysis, from saying bluntly that X causes Y. Instead there is talk of the "interaction" among W and X and Y and Z, each factor acting on the others and in turn being reacted upon. The trouble is that no worthwhile theory of man and society can grow out of such an agnosticism. What matters if a theory proves wrong? Hobbes' theory of human action, Marx's theory of social change, Freud's theory of motivation—all of these

---

4. Pp. 341-42.

5. For an interesting exception to this rule, see the work of the late E. L. Thorndike. In his two books, YOUR CITY (1939) and 144 SMALLER CITIES (1940), he devised a "G-Score" to determine the "goodness of life" in various cities. Each city received a score to compare it with others. Thorndike used such available indices as the infant mortality-rate, public expenditures for teachers' salaries, frequency of home-ownership, and circulation of quality magazines. Most important, he stuck his neck out and assigned a precise numerical weight to each of the indices in the score such that the more important factors carried greater influence. The infant mortality-rate, for example, was multiplied by a weight of 12 whereas the per capita number of automobiles was only multiplied by 4. Who is to say that the infant mortality-rate is to be valued at three times the automobile ownership-rate? The reply is that Thorndike went ahead and said it. He did not claim that his weigths were the embodiment of ultimate statistical truth. But in making such numerical assignments he at least got on with the job rather than talking about how difficult it would be if we ever tried to do it.

can, in some sense, be said to be wrong. But the courage and the commitment behind these theories led to a heightened understanding of ourselves and the world. The same may be said of some recent authors—David Riesman, C. Wright Mills, William H. Whyte, Jr.—all of whom were caricaturists and all of whom have been able to make vivid some of the major trends in our society. That they are rejected by the social science profession on grounds of unsound methodology is a sad commentary on the academic mentality.

"Public opinion," Key writes, "may simply be taken to mean those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed."[6] This is an exemplary definition for a study such as Key's, the concern of which is the relation between opinion and public policy. At the same time he is prepared to cast a wide net in defining those opinions that affect, directly and indirectly, the processes of government. The general attitudes of individuals towards authority, for example, will color their political views. A full comprehension of "political" public opinion necessarily requires that attention be paid to these underlying attitudes. Thus it is legitimate to put a proposition to respondents such as "What young people need most of all is strict discipline by their parents" and to evoke a general expression of agreement or disagreement on this sentiment.[7] Opinions on how to raise children are not "political" opinions, nor is it clear that governments spend much time heeding the attitudes of individuals in this area. Nevertheless, attitudes such as these may be crucial bellwethers of basic political outlooks. On the whole Key is circumspect in his use of "non-political" survey data; he is clearly uneasy about departing from conventional political opinions such as these dealing with foreign policy, civil rights, or welfare. He has a feeling for what is his legitimate jurisdiction as a political scientist and he is wary of entering territory that is properly the sociologists'.

Yet another student of public opinion and American democracy was not prepared to abide by such a limiting rule. "The public, therefore, among a democratic people, has a singular power . . .," Alexis de Tocqueville wrote. "[I]t does not persuade others to its beliefs, but it imposes them and makes them permeate the thinking of everyone by a sort of enormous pressure of the mind of all upon the individual intelligence."[8] Here public opinion is being described as a social rather than political force. Tocqueville's explanation was that each member of society has two roles—a social role and an individual role —and that he tends to live more and more of his life in his social role, thus joining with others to stifle his own individuality and that of his fellow citizens. Tocqueville discussed public opinion almost exclusively in social terms, yet, in so doing he was able to tell us more about political attitudes and behavior than any subsequent writer. For politics is a reflection of social character and institutions.[9]

---

6. P. 14.
7. P. 137.
8. 2 Tocqueville, Democracy in America 11 (Vintage Books ed. 1956).
9. This is, of course, an "X-causes-Y" theory. Moreover, as a generalization it is wrong because there are times when the major institutions and behavior patterns of society have

There is, then, ground for regarding public opinion as an "atmosphere." Tocqueville's metaphor, that it is a "sort of enormous pressure of the mind of all upon the individual intelligence," goes far toward explaining the general contours of American political Life. Legislators and judges certainly can sense this atmosphere, as can members of minority groups who find themselves up against majority sentiment. Key would probably not cavil at this notion, but he would say that if we are satisfied with theories at Tocqueville's level of generality we are too easily contented. For any atmosphere is a compound composed of many elements, and we are obliged to identify them and understand their interaction. In pursuit of this end, Key's *Public Opinion and American Democracy* is a major contribution and is bound to be the standard work in the field for many years to come. Yet even he, in his final chapter, is forced to conclude that the atmosphere of American life is not altogether healthy. Public opinion, political and social, is not what we would like it to be or what it is capable of becoming. "[T]he masses do not corrupt themselves; if they are corrupt [it is because] they have been corrupted . . . [by] . . . the stupidity and self-seeking of leadership echelons."[10] This is, in a nutshall, a theory. It is also a call to put things right. And in ending on a note such as this, Key is in the best tradition of Western political thought.

ANDREW HACKER†

WHO GOVERNS? By Robert A. Dahl. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961. Pp. xii, 355. $7.50.

IN *Who Governs?* Professor Dahl, chairman of the Political Science Department at Yale, makes important contributions to a surprising range of subjects. Academicians who shelve their books by subject matter can give it an important place in their political theory collection, a prominent position on their methodology shelf, or put it among the few really important community studies. Non-academicians can read it for insight into New England history, acculturation of immigrants, nature of political power, or problems of urban redevelopment. And a few lowbrows will doubtless seize on it as a sort of political *Peyton Place* that "tells all" about New Haven politics. It has much to say about all these things, and more.

The study of urban government has long been one of those academic underdeveloped areas with which political science is so well endowed. But no longer can one brush the subject off with a passing reference to the law of

been reshaped by legislation and other governmental instruments. However, in most significant instances the political system, in the United States at least, responds to the needs of dominant interests in society. Key came close to saying as much in two chapters in an early edition of his textbook. See *The Role of Force* and *Education as Politics,* POLITICS, PARTIES, AND PRESSURE GROUPS 619-41, 642-60 (2d ed. 1948).

· 10. Pp. 557-58.   . .

†Associate Professor of Government, Cornell University. ·