

# Democratic Theory and Public Opinion

BY BERNARD BERELSON

Public opinion research has sometimes been neglectful of both the political content of its data and the extent to which it could vitalize the theory of democratic politics.

In this, his Presidential Address before the seventh annual convention of the American Association for Public Opinion Research, Bernard Berelson restates the fundamental requirements of a democratic politic and points out how opinion research can help a democracy to know itself, evaluate its achievements, and bring its practices more nearly in accord with its own fundamental ideals.

Mr. Berelson's interest in this topic has developed out of, and is expressed in, the Elmira study of opinion formation during the Presidential campaign of 1948. In the preparation of this paper, he has benefited from discussions with Edward Shils, his former colleague at the University of Chicago, and from his reading of Mr. Shils' manuscript on *Consensus and Liberty: The Social and Psychological Conditions of Political Democracy*.

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THE field of public opinion research has had a number of intellectual godparents. Psychologists have contributed their experience with attitude and intelligence tests and measurements, as well as substantive concepts and propositions. Sociologists have provided experience with field and community studies and ideas about social structure and the place of opinion within it. Market research has developed new techniques and furnished a variety of practical problems on which to try them. The statisticians have worked on such problems as sampling and scaling. But my subject is the claim of political theory to contribute to the character of public opinion research.

It would be too much to say that it has played no role thus far. For a good many years the political scientists have been discussing the nature of public opinion and the role it plays in the political process. But somehow, in recent years, we have tended to overlook the related facts that there is a political content in what we call public opinion; that there exists a long and elegant intellectual tradition (in the form of the political theory of democracy) for dealing with opinion problems; and that this theory provides a helpful framework for the organization and conduct of opinion studies. The normative theory of political democracy makes certain requirements of the citizen and certain

assumptions about his capacity to meet them. The tools of social research have made it possible, for the first time, to determine with reasonable precision and objectivity the extent to which the practice of politics by the citizens of a democratic state conforms to the requirements and the assumptions of the theory of democratic politics (insofar as it refers to decisions by the electorate). The closer collaboration of political theorists and opinion researchers should contribute new problems, new categories, and greater refinement and elaboration to both sides.

The theorists tell us how a democratic electorate is supposed to behave and we public opinion researchers claim to know something about how the democratic electorate in this country actually does behave. The task I have taken on myself is figuratively to confront the one with the other. Such an analysis should be useful not only in organizing the results of opinion studies in terms of an important body of theory, but also in revealing neglected and promising areas for further investigation. I bespeak the interest of both theorists and researchers in extending, refining, and, in general, improving this formulation. For even on the basis of my preliminary exploration, I am convinced that each side has a good deal to learn from the other and that joint work on this common problem can be valuable both for social science and for public policy.

Such collaboration, like most cross-disciplinary work, is not easy, but it is necessary since neither side can solve the problem alone. In this connection, the deficiencies of the present formulation on the theoretical side will be particularly clear to the political theorist; I can only hope that the representation of theory, drawn as it is from a variety of sources, has not been caricatured, and that the theorists will themselves undertake the indicated corrections.

What, then, does democratic political theory assume or require of the democratic citizen, and to what extent are the assumptions or requirements realized? There are a number of ways of identifying and classifying the requirements, depending upon which political philosophers are given primary consideration. It has seemed most appropriate in this preliminary analysis to present a composite set of requirements, even though they may overlap at various points and thus not present a coherent system. While not all of them may be required in any single

political theory of democracy, all of them are mentioned in one or another theory.

#### THE PREREQUISITES OF ELECTORATE DECISIONS

There appear to be two requirements in democratic theory which refer primarily to characteristics demanded of the electorate as it initially comes to make a political decision. These are the preconditions for electorate decisions.

The first is the possession of a suitable *personality structure*: within a range of variations, the electorate is required to possess the types of character which can operate effectively, if not efficiently, in a free society. Certain kinds of personality structures are not congenial to a democratic society, could not operate successfully within it, and would be destructive of democratic values. Others are more compatible with or even disposed toward the effective performance of the various roles which make up the democratic political system. Among the characteristics required—and this is not intended as anything more than an illustrative list—are a capacity for involvement in situations remote from one's face-to-face experience; a capacity to accept moral responsibility for choices; a capacity to accept frustration in political affairs with equanimity; self-control and self-restraint as reins upon the gross operation of self-interest; a nice balance between submissiveness and assertiveness; a reasonable amount of freedom from anxiety so that political affairs can be attended to; a healthy and critical attitude toward authority; a capacity for fairly broad and comprehensive identifications; a fairly good measure of self-esteem; and a sense of potency.

The distribution of such personality characteristics in the population, let alone their relationship to political behavior, is not known. What is more or less known is only a beginning of the problem. We know, for example, that contrary to common belief the incidence of psychosis has not increased in this country over the past century (Goldhamer and Marshall); on this score, at least, we are not less capable than past generations of governing ourselves. We know that the authoritarian personality is associated with social prejudice and restrictive politics (the Berkeley study of Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, *et al.*); that neuroticism limits attention to political matters (Elmira study); that a wide discrepancy between aspiration and achievement leads some persons to over-aggressive acts against the political environment and

lowers their respect for political leaders (Bettelheim and Janowitz); that the "democratic character" is more flexible and adaptable than the authoritarian character (Lewin and Lippitt).

There is a great deal of work to be done on this problem; and it is here particularly that the psychologists can make an important contribution to the study of political behavior. The influence of character on political democracy has been perceived in general terms by a number of theorists, and some psychologists and sociologists have begun to work on the topic. The dependence of democratic processes upon the "democratic character" seems clear in general, but the nature of this relationship has been only slightly documented in the literature. Without doubt, a sympathetic and imaginative study of the literature of democratic theory will generate many important hypotheses for empirical investigation.

The second requirement is not only a prerequisite but also an outcome of electorate decisions. This is the factor of *interest and participation*;<sup>1</sup> the electorate is required to possess a certain degree of involvement in the process of political decision, to take an appropriate share of responsibility. Political democracy requires a fairly strong and fairly continuous level of interest from a minority, and from a larger body of the citizenry a moderate-to-mild and discontinuous interest but with a stable readiness to respond in critical political situations. Political disinterest or apathy is not permitted, or at least not approved.

Here the descriptive documentation provided by opinion studies is relatively good. The amount of political interest in the community, its fluctuations through time, its incidence among various population groups, its causes and its consequences—on all these topics we have reasonably systematic data. Less than one-third of the electorate is "really interested" in politics, and that group is by no means a cross-section of the total electorate. The more interested people are more likely to affect others and thus to exercise a greater influence upon the outcome of elections. The decreasing political interest in the population, viewed with alarm by some people who are distressed by the fact that a smaller proportion of eligible people vote now than did fifty years ago,

<sup>1</sup> Included here is acceptance of the political sphere as one of the legitimate elements of social life. In a democratic society the political sphere must not be widely viewed as unclean or degraded or corrupt. Opinion studies have produced some data on the image of politics and of politicians among the citizenry.

is to some extent due to the increasing feeling people have that they are impotent to affect political matters in the face of the complexity and magnitude of the issues. Participation in the actual election is not only segmental but also partial; if everybody eligible to vote actually did vote, the distribution of support in recent national elections would have been measurably different. Finally, interest is not a simple uni-dimensional factor. A recent analysis identified three kinds of interest: spectator interest (regarding the campaign as a dramatic spectacle); citizen interest (deciding how to vote); and partisan interest (securing the election of one's own candidate). Of these, only the second is "pure" interest according to some theorists.

The major question raised by this requirement, both for political theory and for opinion research, is the fundamental one of its universality and intensity. People have always argued whether the vote is a duty or a privilege, and there have always been advocates of an unlimited and continuous requirement of interest. As early as the Athenian democracy it was said that "we regard a man who takes no interest in public affairs not as a harmless but as a useless character." But is he really so useless to the operation of democracy? Some recent theorists and studies have suggested that a sizable group of less interested citizens is desirable as a "cushion" to absorb the intense action of highly motivated partisans. For the fact is that the highly interested are the most partisan and the least changeable. If everyone in the community were highly and continuously interested, the possibilities of compromise and of gradual solution of political problems might well be lessened to the point of danger. It is an historical axiom that democracy requires a middle class for its proper operation. Perhaps what it really requires is a body of moderately and discontinuously interested citizens within and across social classes, whose approval of or at least acquiescence in political policies must be secured.

#### THE COMPONENTS OF ELECTORATE DECISIONS

The political theory of democracy also makes requirements regarding the components of electorate decisions; that is, the content of the decision.

The first requirement of electorate decisions is the possession of *information and knowledge*; the electorate must be informed about the matters under consideration. Information refers to isolated

facts and knowledge to general propositions; both of them provide reliable insight into the consequences of the decision. This is a requirement nearly everyone sets down for a democratic electorate; politicians and statesmen, adult educators, journalists, professors of political science—all of them pay deference to the need for “enlightened public opinion.”

This is another factor on which opinion researchers have assembled a good deal of data. What do they show? One persistent conclusion is that the public is not particularly well informed about the specific issues of the day. A recent survey of the current status of American public opinion states that “tests of information invariably show at least twenty per cent of the public totally uninformed (and usually the figure is closer to forty per cent).” And at that, most of the studies have been based upon simple and isolated questions of fact (i.e., information) and only seldom, if at all, upon the historical and general propositions (i.e., knowledge) which underlie political decisions. Perhaps the proportion of the knowledgeable would be even lower than the proportion of the informed. At the same time, it must be recognized that there is a significant middle ground—a kind of vaguely perceived impression which reveals to the possessor certain relationships which are very “real” to him, which form “reasonable” bases for his decision, yet which cannot be explicitly articulated by him in any detail. An obvious example is the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties, a difference visible to many partisans of both.

Thus it often appears that people express opinions on issues when they seem to know very little about them. Lack of information may be a bar to the holding of an opinion in the minds of the theorists but it does not seem to be among the electorate (where, of course, it is not experienced as lack of information at all). In most campaigns, whether political or informational, the people best informed on the issue are the ones least likely to change their minds. Much of this represents attitudinal stability; some of it may represent rigidity.

Information and knowledge are required of the electorate on the assumption that they contribute to the wisdom of the decision; informed citizens make wiser decisions. In this country it is clear that the better-educated people are the best informed and most knowledgeable, yet it is also clear that other variables are involved in the development of wise decisions, e.g., flexibility of predispositions, a wide range of

identifications, a low level of aggressiveness, etc. Finally, it appears from most studies that information and knowledge are sought and used more often as rationalization and reinforcer than as data to be used in making what might be called a free decision.

The requirement thus does not seem to be met in any direct way. But this is really an oversimplified statement of the requirement. How can an electorate be expected to be informed on the wide range of issues which confront the modern public? For example, the front page of *The New York Times* for one day alone recently contained stories on the following events, in each of which is embedded an issue on which the public might be expected to inform itself: price ceilings, the Korean war and the British position in it, the American defense build-up, Communist riots in France, the Berlin crisis, a new disarmament proposal, American military aid to France, official Soviet spies in this country, and the Mutual Security Aid Bill. Clearly there is too little time for simply getting the relevant information, let alone digesting it into a generalized system of political opinions. Actually the major decisions the ordinary citizen is called upon to make in a modern representative democracy involve basic simplifications which need not rest upon a wide range of information so long as they are based upon a certain amount of crucial information, reasonably interpreted. After all, the voter's effective choice is limited; he can vote Republican, he can vote Democratic, or he can refrain from voting, and becoming informed on a number of minor issues usually does not tip the scales against the weight of the few things that really matter—employment, social security, the cost of living, peace.

If the theoretical requirement is "full" information and knowledge, then democratic practice does not conform. But for some theorists the requirement is more differentiated than that. Representative government with large-scale political organization does not require that everyone be equally informed on everything all the time. To such a differentiated standard, actual practice may conform reasonably well. Opinion studies should not only document this requirement, but also refine their inquiries into the actual ways in which information and knowledge are held and used by the citizen in his vote decision. At the same time, theorists should differentiate and elaborate their conceptions of the intellectual requirements for a democratic citizenry.

The second component required of decisions is the possession of *principle*; the electorate is required to possess a body of stable political principle or moral standards, in contrast with fluctuating impulses or whims, to which topical questions can be referred for evaluation and decision.

Such principles are of two kinds. In the first place, there are the principles which refer to democratic procedures (as distinguished from the content of democratic decisions) and on them there must be consensus. Everyone, or nearly everyone, must agree on the rules of the political game and accept them in advance of the controversy so that they will obtain even in defeat. Among such principles are the rules that violence must not be involved in the making of electoral decisions; that the majority decision must be accepted as final in any particular instance, until legitimately appealed to a court, a legislative body, or the citizenry; that the citizen must have due respect for constituted authority; that the citizen must share respect with other parts of the community and thus be ready for political compromise. Few data on such questions have been collected in opinion studies, perhaps because their wide observance seems so obvious. It would be instructive to describe more precisely the citizenry's image of desirable and actual processes of democracy and to analyze the factors responsible for it.

The other kind of principle refers to the substantive bases of political decisions—the underlying moral or political ends in terms of which particular issues are determined at particular times. Just what they are for different parts of the population is difficult to say in the absence of more systematic research devoted to this purpose. At this time, however, it would seem at least likely that the *same* avowed principles underlie political positions at every point on the continuum from left to right. Full employment, a high standard of living, freedom, a better life for one's children, peace—these are the types of answers we have now, and we get them from persons of every political persuasion. Now this is not so empty as it sounds. Democratic theorists have pointed out what is often overlooked because too visible, namely, that an effective democracy must rest upon a body of political and moral consensus. If splits in the population are too sharp or too great, democratic processes cannot be maintained because of actual, threatened, or suspected conflict among partisans. In this circumstance, a seeming consensus which is accepted at its face value is far better than no con-

sensus—and a seeming consensus is sometimes reflected in loyalty to the same symbols even though they carry different meanings. A sense of homogeneity is often an efficient substitute for the fact of homogeneity. Thus it is not an empty assertion to say that the role of substantive principles—like that of some information—is both to rationalize and to guide the choice simultaneously. Rationalization has a social function, too. What this means, then, is that the selection of means to reach agreed-upon ends is more likely to divide the electorate than the selection of the ends themselves.

At the same time, however, the principles must be applicable to current political life. Political decisions made today in the light of principles which support or oppose the major social reforms identified as the “New Deal” or the “welfare state” are relevant. But decisions made *simply* in conformity to an historical regional loyalty or to a primary group loyalty are of dubious relevance; and those made *only* in conformity to an ancestral loyalty or a religious loyalty are of no relevance at all. When theorists insist that public decisions in a democracy must be based upon principle and doctrine, they mean principle and doctrine which can confront and cope with the major problems of the age. Yet the studies show that a large proportion of the party vote today is by this test unprincipled.

If it is nothing more, then, the requirement of principle or doctrine means that the electorate must genuinely accept the procedures and rules involved in democratic processes, that it must at least share the symbols describing the substantive ends to which political action is directed and in terms of which it is justified, and that it must make political decisions on the basis of relevant standards. The first two requirements are met to a greater extent than the third.

#### THE PROCESS OF ELECTORATE DECISION

The third set of essentials in democratic theory refers to the process by which decisions are made. Here there seem to be three requirements.

The first of the requirement relates to the process of perception of which information and knowledge are the end products. This is the requirement of *accurate observation*; the electorate is required to perceive political realities clearly and objectively, with an absence or only a small amount of subjective distortion. It is difficult indeed to see life steadily and see it whole, and in politics clarity of perception is made

doubly hard on the one hand by the predispositional strength which the citizen brings to the matter and, on the other, by the deliberate and in many cases inevitable ambiguity which the political leader brings there.

There is no need to labor this point. Walter Lippmann made a reputation for himself thirty years ago by elaborating the differences between the "world outside and the pictures in our heads." For the most part, he said, "we do not first see and then define, we define first and then see." Recent studies provide some documentation which refines this general observation. According to data from the Elmira study, not only is the citizen's image of the candidate and the campaign subject to the influence of preconception, but so is his view of group support for the candidates and even of the candidates' stand on political issues. Given just a minimum of ambiguity to work with—and that is usually available—people tend to think their candidate agrees with them, or at least they manage not to know where he stands on the particular issue when they stand on the other side. The stronger the party affiliation, the greater the misperception.

The consequences of such misperception are interesting to speculate about. It seems to decrease the tension within the individual since it enables him to bring his opinions into an internal consistency without disturbing his basic position. At the same time, it increases the internal solidarity of the parties and thus increases political tension within the community by seeming to sharpen the differences between the parties, particularly under the stress of a political campaign. Thus political perception is by no means simply a matter of concrete observation; it also involves protective coloration from a total position. And hence, that democratic theory which assumes clarity and objectivity of political perception must be qualified at the outset.

The second important requirement of democratic process is *communication and discussion*; the electorate is required to engage in discussion and communication on political affairs. Democratic decision-making requires free examination of political ideas, and this means discussion. Democratic citizens are supposed to listen to their political leaders arguing with one another, to listen to them when they speak directly to the electorate, to talk back to them, and to discuss among themselves the public issues of the day. According to many modern theorists, this requirement stands at the heart of the democratic process.

“Above all, if it is to be true to its own peculiar nature, democracy must enlist the effective thought of the whole community in the operation of discussion.”

Now here again, as in the case of information, public opinion researchers have assembled a sizable body of data, not only on the amount and kind of communication and discussion within the community but also on the conditions under which it takes place. The overall picture presented by the opinion studies looks something like this: There is a 20 per cent nucleus of people who are active and regular political discussants, another group of 25 per cent who engage in political discussion on occasion, another 25 per cent who are activated into discussion only by dramatic political events, and a residual group of 25 or 30 per cent who do not engage in political discussion at all. Furthermore, it is particular groups within the community that give most attention to politics: the better-educated, the men, the “joiners”—in short, those groups most subject to social pressure translated into expectations of how “our kind of people” should behave in this respect. And the people who read and listen to political content in the mass media also talk and listen to other people, and thus the concentration of political communication and discussion is carried one step further.

To complete the picture we need to ask two other questions which together bring into consideration another aspect of this requirement. Democratic citizens are required not simply to discuss politics, but to discuss political alternatives in a genuine effort to clarify and refine public policy. The first question is, “Who talks to whom?”, and the answer is that people mostly discuss politics with other people like themselves—“like” in such characteristics as social position, occupation, and attitude. Mainly this goes on inside the family, but even outside it there is a clear tendency for political discussions to be carried out intra- rather than inter-social groups. The second question is, “What do they see and hear and talk about?” The broad answer is, “What pleases them”; i.e., what is congenial to their own point of view. People usually read and listen to their own side. In person-to-person discussion of politics, about a third or more of the talk centers upon topics not directly involving political preferences—for example, predictions of and arguments about who will win an election—and the remainder consists overwhelmingly of exchange of mutually agreeable remarks. What this all means—and this is clearly documented—is that the people

who do the most reading and listening and talking are the people who change their minds the least. Lowell did not say it first but he said it well: "To a great extent, people hear what they want to hear and see what they want to see. They associate by preference with people who think as they do, enter freely into conversation with them, and avoid with others topics that are controversial, irritating or unpleasant. This is not less true of what they read. To most people, that which runs counter to their ideas is disagreeable, and sought only from a sense of duty."

In summary, then, genuine political discussion—not acrimonious argumentation on the one hand or mutual admiration for right thinking on the other, but free and open discussion devoted to finding a solution to a problem through the clarification and modification of views—this is not marked by its magnitude. Perhaps it is naive to point this out once more; perhaps it is naive to require it in the first place. We cannot inquire here into what the requirement of discussion can really mean in a modern democracy; whether self-interested argument is improper, whether genuine discussion goes on a different level in the political process. But certainly democratic practice does not conform fully to the requirements of some theorists: "The person or party formulating political principles or policies in advance of discussion, and refusing to compromise under any circumstances; or settling such principles or policies before the process of discussion is completed and refusing to compromise further; renders discussion a farce in the first place, and in the second, limits its usefulness."

The third requirement under process is *rationality*; the electorate is required to exercise rational judgment in political decisions.

Philosophers and economists still talk professionally about "rational behavior," but sociologists never really used the concept, psychologists have given it up, and political scientists seem to be in process of doing so. The problem of giving the term a clear meaning acceptable to others is partly responsible for this state of affairs. The term, says a recent writer on rational conduct, "has enjoyed a long history which has bequeathed to it a legacy of ambiguity and confusion. . . . Any man may be excused when he is puzzled by the question how he ought to use the word and in particular how he ought to use it in relation to human conduct and to politics."

The difficulty, of course, is not that there is no reasonably clear

definition for the term but that there are several definitions describing several different kinds of rationality. And the conformity of democratic practice varies with each definition. Let us review a few major meanings and their relationship to democratic practice. In the first place, we may distinguish between the rational decision as outcome and the rational decision as process. In the former case we speak of rationality as equivalent to a "right" decision. This assumes that there is one right answer to every problem, and that the power of reason can arrive at truths of policy which should be evident to all—all, that is, except those ruled by prejudice or emotion. When this is not simply a euphemism for describing decisions of which we approve, it presumably refers to a decision taken in conformity with an estimate of desirable ends (it thus assumes a valid analysis of whose interest lies where) and also in conformity with a correct estimate of which means will achieve the given ends. If we leave determination of self-interest up to the individual involved, then virtually all electorate decisions are rational by this definition; if we leave it up to the "objective observer" then the proportion will vary arbitrarily with his estimate of the present situation and the future. Even in philosophy, this meaning appears to be so ambiguous that it is difficult to see how we can design empirical research to test the extent of its observance by the electorate.

If we take rationality as referring to the process of decision—a more likely definition—then various possibilities are available. One meaning requires a certain independence of the rational process from the influence of predispositions broadly defined. Here rationality becomes the "free decision"—free from coercive imposition; free from blinding institutional loyalties; free from personal position (such as class or race); free from passions and impulses; free, in short, from any distorting or distracting pressures which prevent clear observation and calm, sober reflection. Here the term refers to logical, syllogistic ratiocination. But this seems to be an impractical, untenable, undesirable, and quite unreasonable definition; it takes the content heart out of politics and leaves the voter with no real basis on which to evaluate political proposals. By this standard, at least in its extreme version, there are almost no rational voters. As a social philosopher says, "individuals who on their own initiative form or change their fundamental beliefs through genuine critical reflection are so rare that they may be classed as abnormal."

A second meaning of rationality is close to, if not identical with, our requirement of information and knowledge: the voter should be aware of the correct state of public affairs at the present and of the "reasonable" consequences of alternative proposals for action. By this definition someone who made up his political mind on the basis of ends for which there are no present means of attainment would be making a non-rational decision, and so would the person whose estimates of the present situation or of the future were wrong. Also by this meaning the voter should be capable of indicating some relevant grounds for his decision, and most voters can cite such grounds. Here we meet the difficult question of rationalization, as against rationality, but we can suggest a partial answer. Rationality is limited by the individual's incapacity to deal with the real world in all its complexity, so it must allow for the legitimacy of dealing with simplified models of reality. In politics, the voter may "really" decide on the basis of one or two issues which are dominant for him (for example, peace or the New Deal) and use other issues as reinforcing rationalizations (for example, the military background of a candidate or corruption in the Federal administration).

A third definition requires the presence of convincibility or open-mindedness in consideration of political issues. This does not require the citizen to change his mind but only to be genuinely open to a change of mind. Here the time involved seems crucial. If this means, for example, that the citizen should be open-minded between June and November of an election year, then probably fewer than half the electorate is rational, and very few indeed in the South and parts of New England. If it includes the four years of a presidential administration or the "natural history" of a major political issue, from birth in controversy to death in near-unanimity, then the figure would become quite higher. It is hard for the researcher to be more specific because of the difficulty of determining just when "genuine consideration," as against rationalization, goes on.

Still another meaning of rationality as process requires that the decision be made in a state of low psychic tension; that is, that the decision not be an emotional one but be marked by a certain amount of detachment and freedom from passion. This poses a nice democratic dilemma; the people most rational by this definition are the people least interested in the political process and least involved in its outcome.

The more interested people are the more emotional, in this sense, and the least detached; they are the ones who ascribe important consequences to the outcome of the decision and thus find enough psychic energy to be active about the matter. Here the rational voter is the independent voter, that is, the one without sufficient interest or investment in the election to get excited about it.

Still other meanings are available. There is the meaning in which rationality refers to the presence of deliberately directed behavior to consciously formulated purposes. Here again, almost all voters could qualify. There is the meaning in which rationality refers to a choice of behavior that is optimal in some sense, and this definition can be readily satisfied on the grounds of a subjective optimum if nothing more. There is the meaning in which a rational decision is a self-consistent decision. There are undoubtedly other meanings.

If it is not easy to say what is meant by a rational decision, it is somewhat easier to say what is not meant by it. A rational decision is not a capricious decision, or an impulsive one, or an unprincipled one, or a decision guided by custom or habit or tradition or sentiment alone. But the central problem is to relate the demand of rationality to the analysis of decision-making in terms of such sociopsychological concepts as the reference group; that is, to see the "rational decision" as imbedded in a social context which limits it at the same time that it gives it political meaning. While the types of rationality are not easy to define and while they are certainly never present in a pure or extreme form, they can be isolated empirically, clarified, and investigated as to their frequency, their functions, and their preconditions.

#### THE OUTCOME OF ELECTORATE DECISIONS

Finally, there is one basic requirement which might be included under the need for principle but which seems to deserve independent treatment in view of its central importance with reference to the outcome of the decision. This is the requirement of *community interest*; the electorate is supposed to come to political decisions on consideration of the common good rather than, or in addition to, self-interest.

In several formulations of democratic theory, the electorate is required to devote thought to what is good for the community as a whole instead of relying exclusively upon calculation of what is good for oneself or one's own group. The classical formulation comes from

John Stuart Mill: "In any political election . . . the voter is under an absolute moral obligation to consider the interests of the public, not his private advantage, and give his vote, to the best of his judgment, exactly as he would be bound to do if he were the sole voter, and the election depended upon him alone."

Now here again the problem of definition is a central one. How is the researcher to distinguish between honest conclusion and forced rationalization, as in the slogan, "What's good for me is good for the country"? How distinguish the "immediate and apparent interest" from the "ultimate and real interest"? Does self-interest refer only to the criterion of direct self-gain or to that of benefit to one's group or class, and over what period of time? Does community interest refer to agreement on procedures, or to an outside criterion (and if so, what), or to the residual decision after the various self-interests have balanced themselves out, or to genuine concern for other groups, or to restraint upon self-interest, or to deviation from the predominant vote of one's group? The more one looks into the matter, the more it appears that one man's self-interest is another man's community interest, and that many people sincerely identify the one with the other. Nor have the theorists overlooked this. "Men come easily to believe that arrangements agreeable to themselves are beneficial to others," said Dicey. "A man's interest gives a bias to his judgment far oftener than it corrupts his heart." And from Schumpeter: "To different individuals and groups the common good is bound to mean different things. This fact, hidden from the utilitarian by the narrowness of his outlook on the world of human valuations, will introduce rifts on questions of principle which cannot be reconciled by rational argument."

In a current study of opinion formation (the Elmira study), we concluded that it is more satisfactory to analyze this question in terms of the forces making for political cleavage and political consensus within the community. The health of a democratic order depends on achieving a nice balance between them: enough cleavage to stimulate debate and action, enough consensus to hold the society together even under strain. Political parties in a democracy should disagree—but not too much, too sharply, nor too fundamentally. The evidences of cleavage are clear to everyone. Cleavage along class and religious and regional lines in addition to direct attitudinal differences on basic issues of foreign and domestic policy—these are so familiar as to require no

elaboration. At the same time there are important evidences of consensus, of political cohesion, which deserve more attention than they usually get. In the first place, there is the basic fact that group memberships and identifications overlap political choices; sizable political minorities are found in various social groups and this provides a kind of glue to hold the community together. In addition, even at the height of a presidential campaign there are sizable attitudinal minorities within each party and each social group on political issues, and thus sizable attitudinal agreements across party and group lines. Such overlappings link various groups together and prevent their further estrangement. All of this means that democratic politics in this country is happily not total politics—a situation where politics is the single or central selector and rejector, where other social differences are drawn on top of political lines. Cross-pressures in political allegiances, based upon a pluralistic system of values, are thus highly important to the society.

So the question of self and community interest may best be seen as the question of cleavage and consensus. The multiplicity and the heterogeneity of identifications and associations in the great society develop an overlapping, pluralistic social organization which both sharpens and softens the impact and the consequences of political activity.

#### CONCLUSION

The political theory of democracy, then, requires that the electorate possess appropriate personality structures, that it be interested and participate in public affairs, that it be informed, that it be principled, that it correctly perceive political realities, that it engage in discussion, that it judge rationally, and that it consider the community interest.

Now this combination of requirements sets a high—an ideal—standard for the political process. And since this is a composite list, from a variety of sources, it is not necessarily a matter for disillusionment or even disappointment that the democratic electorate does not conform to every requirement in the full degree. There is always an appropriate observation from Lord Bryce:

“Orthodox political theory assumes that every citizen has, or ought to have, thought out for himself certain opinions, for example, ought to have a definite view, defensible by arguments, of what the country needs, what principles ought to be applied in governing it, of the men to whose hands

the government ought to be entrusted. There are persons who talk, though certainly very few who act, as if they believed this theory, which may be compared to the theory of some ultra-Protestants that every good Christian has or ought to have, by the strength of his own reason, worked out for himself from the Bible a system of theology."

Opinion studies in recent years have done much to fill in the picture of what actually happens in democratic decision-making. As is evident even from this brief survey, they have done so in three ways: first, by documenting the theoretical assumptions with facts about actual political behavior; second, by clarifying the concepts and assumptions of democratic theory, if in no other way simply by insisting upon researchable formulations; and third, by differentiating and reformulating the general theoretical propositions in more exact terms. Further systematic exploration of this subject within a sharper, more valid, and more sophisticated framework of political theory should make a rich contribution to each side. The difficulties of collaboration between political theorists on the one hand and opinion researchers on the other must not be allowed to stand in the way of joint work, for the theorists can provide a systematic statement in terms of which public opinion studies can be meaningfully organized, and the empirical researchers can document the theoretical requirements. The theorists can suggest new concepts and hypotheses to the researcher, and the researcher can force the theorists to sharpen and differentiate—yes, and quantify—their formulations.

Of course there are problems but they should be negotiated or overcome. For example, the theorists tend to use descriptive categories (e.g., rationality) and the researchers prefer predictive categories (e.g., group memberships) in "explaining" political preferences. Hard and joint thinking on such problems should bring returns.

The investigation of the realities of democratic processes at the level of the electorate is a useful service and it should be carried forward. Opinion studies can help a democracy not only to know itself in a topical and immediate way but also to evaluate its achievement and its progress in more general terms. In this framework, the study of public opinion can make a telling contribution in the basic, continuous struggle to bring democratic practice more and more into harmony with the requirements and the assumptions—that is, with the ideals—of democratic theory.