

THE POLITICAL EDUCATION OF JOHN ZALLER

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ABSTRACT: *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992) provided both a powerful framework for analyzing public opinion and a highly influential account of the role of political elites in shaping public opinion. Zaller's own subsequent work has focused less on the mechanics of opinion change than on the role of public opinion in the broader political process. This evolution has entailed sustained attention to V. O. Key Jr.'s concept of "latent opinion"—the opinion politicians are likely to face in the next election, as distinct from what is currently measurable in surveys. It has also entailed a downgrading of the importance attached to Media Politics—"the attempt to govern on the basis of words and images that diffuse through the mass media"—relative to Party Politics—"the substance of party performance." In recent work, Zaller and his colleagues have emphasized the key role of interest groups and activists in shaping parties' policy choices, largely free of effective constraint by the mass public. This work provides a rather more pessimistic take on "The Question of Elite Domination of Public Opinion" raised in the epilogue to *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.

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² Unless otherwise indicated, my characterizations of Zaller's views are based on personal communications. Since many of these communications occurred late at night in conference hotel bars, my renderings should be understood as approximations of what Zaller said, or

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When *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* was published in 1992, I was quoted on the back cover calling it “the most significant contribution to the scientific study of public opinion in almost three decades.” To readers conversant with the scholarly literature, that time frame would immediately have called to mind Philip Converse’s classic 1964 essay on “The Nature of Belief Systems in Mass Publics.” Zaller’s book did—and still does—rank with Converse’s essay as a fundamental touchstone for modern scholarship on public opinion.³

However, from the perspective of twenty years later, and especially in light of the subsequent course of Zaller’s career, an equally fitting comparison might have been to the work of V. O. Key, Jr., who spent the last years of his own career striving “to place the newer knowledge about public opinion in a political context” (Key 1961, vii). In his magisterial study of *Public Opinion and American Democracy*, Key (ibid.) complained about the extent to which scholars had “abstracted public opinion from its governmental setting.” Our “knowledge of the microscopic aspects of public opinion,” he wrote, “must remain of little avail until the relation of these bits of information to the operation of the political system in the large can be shown.” Zaller, striving diligently to meet Key’s challenge, has gone from studying the nature and origins of mass opinion to emphasizing “the complexity of the process by which politicians’ estimates of public opinion affect their decisions” (Zaller 2003, 312); and, in turn, to

meant to say, or should have meant to say, rather than as precise transcriptions of what he did say.

³ Converse’s essay was reprinted as the centerpiece of a *Critical Review* (vol. 18, nos. 1-3) symposium on “Democratic Competence,” which itself has been republished in book form (Friedman and Friedman 2012).

wondering whether a political system dominated by “group-centric parties” might provide “a better way of insuring [sic] that all points of view are heard than relying on the insipid discourse of mass politics for this purpose” (Bawn, Cohen, Karol, Masket, Noel, and Zaller 2012, 591). From a scholarly standpoint, that is progress. But for people with a rooting interest in American democracy, the evolution of Zaller’s scholarship—and perhaps the evolution of the American political system, as well—makes the “bleak” portrait of the citizenry (Shapiro 1998, 503) presented in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* look even bleaker.

In what follows, I first provide some intellectual background, tracing the evolution of Zaller’s ideas and arguments from his dissertation on “Elite Influence on Public Opinion” (1984a) to *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992). Second, I consider what political scientists seem to have learned from Zaller’s book, and what that suggests about the book and about the scientific character of the field. Third, I briefly summarize the evolution of Zaller’s scholarly agenda in the twenty years following the publication of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, emphasizing the extent to which his subsequent work represents an implicit—and occasionally explicit—repudiation of the emphases in the book. And fourth, I consider the broad implications of the book, and of Zaller’s subsequent scholarly work, for our understanding of democratic politics.

The Origins and Nature of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*

Zaller’s career provides impressive evidence of intellectual growth—a three-decade-long political education. It also provides an admirable model of social-scientific research that consistently sheds light on big questions, rather than settling for narrow analyses of less significant political phenomena just because they happen to be easily

researched. For scholars of public opinion, more specifically, it highlights the power of survey data and, at the same time, the inability of survey data alone to shed light “squarely on the interaction between politicians and citizens in the democratic process”—as Zaller (2003, 312, channeling Key put it.

I first came to know Zaller as a graduate student at Berkeley in the late 1970s. Having spent his entire life in California (including an undergraduate degree in history from UC San Diego and a two-year stint as a journalist), he seemed unfazed by the surroundings; he used to refer affectionately to Telegraph Avenue as the global minimum of normative order in the universe. As a bold and perceptive thinker who was also a diligent student, he was well situated to flourish in a political-science department that emphasized breadth and big questions, and in a vibrant Survey Research Center (subsequently dismantled) that provided “an intellectual home” (Zaller 1984a, vi) and modern training in data analysis.

Zaller’s dissertation, “The Role of Elites in Shaping Public Opinion,” certainly tackled a big topic: “to explain where new political attitudes come from and how they gain public support,” as the first sentence of the abstract put it (Zaller 1984a, iii). The first four chapters—182 pages—contain no survey data, no tables of regression coefficients, and little concrete discussion of public opinion. Rather, they set out and defend the claim “that most new attitudes originate among the nation’s scientific and policy elite, spread outward to professional politicians and the press, and (through the intermediation of these groups) diffuse gradually among the mass public” (ibid.). As Zaller noted in the very first footnote, this portion of his argument drew heavily upon the work of one of his mentors, Nelson Polsby (1984), who analyzed the role of sub-communities of scientists and policy specialists in supplying elected officials with new policy options. Zaller expanded Polsby’s framework to include the press and the

public, drawing primarily on three detailed case studies—of school desegregation in the 1950s, the Vietnam War in the 1960s, and gay rights in the 1970s. Although portions of these case studies were incorporated into Zaller's later book, they are well worth reading in their original form.

The second half of Zaller's dissertation—three chapters consisting of 150 pages—would look much more familiar to a reader of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*. Here he laid out the two-step model of attitude change derived from the prior work of Converse (1962) and McGuire (1968), generalized it to situations with competing elite messages, and compared its empirical implications with those of alternative models. (Interestingly, the terminology of “mainstream” and “polarization” effects was here applied in the first instance to existing models in the literature, and only by extension to Zaller's own model.) This material corresponds roughly with chapters 6-11 in the published book, except that in the dissertation, the range of empirical examples is considerably narrower, being limited to the three cases of school desegregation, the Vietnam War, and gay rights.

Almost as soon as the dissertation was submitted,⁴ Zaller (1992, 96) turned from the macro-focus on the relationship between elite discourse and public opinion to a micro-focus on “the form and nature of attitudes.” A conference paper aiming “Toward a Theory of the Survey Response” (Zaller 1984b)—and extensive involvement in pilot studies sponsored by the National Election Studies project in 1985 and 1987—led to additional work on “Vague Questions vs. Vague Minds” (Zaller 1988), and eventually to a fruitful collaboration with Stanley Feldman on “A Simple Theory of the Survey Response” (Zaller and Feldman 1992). This work forms the basis for much of

⁴ Zaller has alleged that he did not read a single novel during his many years in graduate school, but celebrated the completion of his dissertation by reading *Moby Dick*.

the first five chapters of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* (1992, 28-96). The extent to which these ideas were “in the air” is underlined by the fact that a quite similar model of the survey response was being formulated more or less simultaneously by psychologists Roger Tourangeau and Kenneth Rasinski and their colleagues at the National Opinion Research Center (Tourangeau and Rasinski 1988; Tourangeau et al. 1989a; Tourangeau et al. 1989b; Rasinski and Tourangeau 1991; Tourangeau et al. 1991). However, their major synthetic statement, *The Psychology of the Survey Response*, was not published until several years later (Tourangeau et al. 2000), and while it became an extremely influential book in its own right, it never achieved the disciplinary impact of Zaller’s book.

A brief stint as an assistant professor at Princeton University exposed Zaller to two additional ideas that turned out to play important roles in his theory of the survey response. One is the emphasis on ambivalence in Jennifer Hochschild’s in-depth study of ordinary people’s thinking about redistribution, *What’s Fair?* (Hochschild 1981, ch. 8). The other is the notion of “considerations,” which he adopted (and adapted) from Stanley Kelley’s work on “The Simple Act of Voting” (Kelley and Mirer 1974) and *Interpreting Elections* (Kelley 1983). According to Zaller (1992, 308, *emph. added*), the heart of his model of the survey response was the notion “that individuals do not possess ‘true attitudes,’ in the usual technical sense of the term, on most political issues, but a series of *considerations* that are typically rather poorly integrated.”

I concur with his assessment that this way of thinking about attitudes is “essentially correct and deserves, in one form or another, a central place in our understanding of the nature of mass opinion.” Indeed, I have argued elsewhere (Bartels 2003) that this aspect of Zaller’s framework has crucial implications not only for empirical research on public opinion, but also for normative democratic theory.

Zaller's second main idea—the centerpiece of the second half of his dissertation and, in more elaborate form, of the second half of his book—was that “an interaction between political awareness and political predispositions is fundamental to the process by which citizens use information from the political environment to form opinions” (Zaller 1992, 308). Zaller motivated this interaction by appealing to the Converse-McGuire two-step model of exposure (in Zaller's version, “reception”) and acceptance of political information; and he interpreted various observed patterns of opinion change among people with differing levels of political awareness as evidence for the two-step model.

It is worth noting that the book presents rather little direct evidence for this interpretation of the relationship between political information and opinion. A few graphs show strong positive relationships between general political awareness and specific bits of political information (Zaller 1992, 17, 153), suggesting that “diffusion of political news” does increase with awareness, as the Converse-McGuire model implies. However, for the most part the separate determinants of “reception” and “acceptance” were simply inferred from interactive models relating opinions to “awareness” of political information, and to plausibly relevant measures of “political predispositions” (ibid., 182, 184, 199, 222, 239, 259, and 260).

Of course, without further restrictions, *any* conditional relationship between political awareness and opinion—positive, negative, or curvilinear—can be represented as the product of a positive relationship (purportedly reflecting the *positive* effect of political awareness on the probability of “reception” of political arguments) and a negative relationship (purportedly reflecting the *negative* effect of political awareness on the probability of “acceptance” of arguments once they are received). Thus, insofar as Zaller provided “tests” of the model, they hinge on the substantive plausibility of

the estimated “reception” and “acceptance” functions in specific instances. It is certainly not the case, as some subsequent analysts seem to have supposed, that curvilinear relationships between political awareness and opinion per se constitute evidence in support of Zaller’s model. Zaller (1992, 290) himself was clear enough on this point, noting that while his theory “can certainly be used . . . as the basis for rigorous statistical modeling,” it “fail[s] to yield clear predictions about what will happen in a given situation.”

What We’ve Learned from Zaller: Scholarly Influence and (Not Much) Scrutiny

The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion is one of the most-cited works of contemporary political science, with more than 5,000 citations recorded in the Google Scholar database. While I cannot pretend to have conducted a systematic content analysis of these references, even an impressionistic survey may shed interesting light on what (and how) scholars seem to have learned from the book.

Of course, citations have limitations as indicators of the influence of this or any other scholarly work. For example, they miss the various ways in which Zaller’s characterizations of previous work has shaped our collective understanding of what that work says and what it means, even when his interpretations are not explicitly cited.⁵ On the other hand, many citations are essentially decorative, invoking Zaller’s book in support of assertions only tangentially related to its actual content. As Nelson Polsby was fond of saying, the mark of a classic work of scholarship is that it gets

⁵ A small but illuminating personal example: Zaller (1992, 347) attributed to me a non-existent book entitled *The Dynamics of Presidential Primaries*, which has subsequently been cited by several other scholars who apparently found his title more compelling than the one I gave to a similar, actual book.

cited irrelevantly—and by that measure, *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* is assuredly a classic.

Setting aside gratuitous references, one of the more commonly cited lessons of Zaller's book is the general idea that "consequential decisions can be more 'shallow' than we would like to believe" (Todorov et al. 2005, 1626). For example, Michael Lewis-Beck and colleagues (2008, 247) argue that "the prevalence of weakly held opinions on public policy . . . comprises a central component in an influential current theory about the general dynamics of public opinion," while Matthew Levendusky (2009, 50) asserts that "ordinary voters struggle to make sense of politics in any sort of abstract, ideological terms, and they struggle to achieve coherence in their political worldview." At times, Zaller has been enlisted as a convenient poster boy for a caricatured view of the entire field of political behavior research, as by Arthur Lupia and Mathew D. McCubbins 1998 (3): "Cicero's observation that 'in the common people there is no wisdom, no penetration, no power of judgment' is an apt summary of modern voting studies."

In more nuanced accounts, scholars have appealed to Zaller's (1992, 21) emphasis on "the central importance of political awareness" in conditioning opinion formation, thereby appropriately drawing *relative* rather than *absolute* conclusions about the structure of opinion. For example, Geoffrey Layman 2001 (250) argues that "politically aware citizens are much better able than politically unaware citizens to connect their predispositions to the appropriate policy attitudes and to support for the appropriate political candidates"; and Eric Lawrence, John Sides and Henry Farrell (2010, 143) assert that "Zaller shows that the politically aware have a larger number of stored ideas about political issues and objects, a more consistent or homogeneous set of ideas, and a greater resistance to attitude change." Another often-cited feature of

Zaller's account is the idea that "citizens' opinions are comprised of competing ideas and considerations" (Mutz 2002, 840). However, scholars seem to disagree about what to make of this idea. Sometimes it is cited as a sort of vindication of the significance of seemingly contradictory survey responses. For example, Robert S. Erikson, Michael B. MacKuen, and James A. Stimson (2002, 18) caution that "we should keep in mind that many individuals are both liberal and conservative. In the sense of Zaller (1992), the same individual, depending upon the considerations of the moment, is capable of sincerely advocating more government at some times and places and less at others." Other scholars interpret the same perspective as limiting the political significance of what survey respondents say, as when Pippa Norris (2011, 146) argues that "the artificial interview process prompts respondents to offer what Zaller calls 'top-of-the-head responses' triggered by the specific question wording and order and other related contextual framing cues, without necessarily attaching any deeper meaning to their answers."

A somewhat less common category of citations reflects specific technical points on which subsequent scholars have followed—or at least endorsed—Zaller's operational leads. For example, Lewis-Beck et al. (2008, 300) cite Zaller to the effect that "a consensus has emerged recently that sophistication is measured most effectively by a person's general factual knowledge regarding the elements of politics." And John T. Jost and colleagues (2009, 317) note that "familiarity with the discursive superstructure [as defined by political elites] is easier to detect in the general public once survey-based measurement error is taken into account."

The most common single theme, by far, in references to Zaller's book—especially, it seems, in more recent references—is that mass opinion is shaped by elite discourse. For example:

There is an extensive literature on how elites shape mass public opinion by establishing the terms of the discourse and by framing the issues for the mass media and, thereby, for the mass public. (Schmidt 2008, 311)

This account is substantially in accord with Zaller's (1992) account of mass opinion and attitude change being driven primarily by elites and in many ways. (Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009, 171)

Ordinary voters look to elites who share their partisan and ideological outlook and adopt those elites' positions as their own. . . . Voters look to elites who share their values to figure out where they should stand on the issues . . . elites are the driving force behind public opinion. (Levendusky 2009, 7, 12, 35)

Perhaps it should be unsurprising to find that, with the passage of time, the message of a complex scholarly work increasingly gets boiled down to a single take-away point. However, what is most striking about this principal emphasis in the literature is how little it has to do with the evidence actually presented in Zaller's book. As Zaller (1992, 272) himself noted, his model "is simply a means for specifying the process of diffusion of elite influence, where the reasons for believing that it is elite influence, rather than something else, that is diffusing must be supplied independently of the model." He raised questions in the book (*ibid.*, 268-274)—and, as we shall see, in his subsequent work—about the extent to which his analysis actually supplied compelling "reasons for believing that it is elite influence" that is being diffused.

In only three cases did Zaller (1992, 15, 187, 316) provide even rudimentary content analyses of elite discourse; and in those cases simple counts of stories in newsmagazines or television were used to gauge general trends in coverage of the defense budget, the Vietnam War or homosexuality, rather than being integrated explicitly into empirical analyses of shifting public opinion about those issues. His

closest approach to a direct test of the impact of elite discourse came in an analysis of voting in congressional elections, where incumbent spending, challenger spending, and media coverage (a measure of survey respondents' average self-reported exposure to newspaper articles about the campaign in each district) appeared in the "reception function" of a non-linear regression model intended to mimic Zaller's more complicated two-message model (*ibid.*, 219-28). The results of this analysis suggested that elite discourse (referred to in this context as "campaign intensity") had "cross-cutting effects" on vote intentions, increasing defections to House incumbents among voters with relatively low levels of political awareness but decreasing defections among those with higher levels of awareness—a pattern Zaller (*ibid.*, 227-28) attributed to the (unmeasured) relative volume of separate incumbent and challenger messages. That is, Zaller inferred that voters with high political awareness were likely to hear messages from a challenger from their own party, while voters with low political awareness were more likely to hear the incumbent's message alone, failing to "receive" the challenger's message and thus being in no position to "accept" it. This inference presupposed that there was a higher volume of pro-incumbent messages. Would more systematic tests show that the actual volume of competing messages in these and other cases were consistent with the "loudness" of competing messages implied by Zaller's analyses? Remarkably, as far as I know, no one has bothered to check.⁶

⁶ More rudimentary analyses of the relationship between media content and public opinion have sometimes been framed with reference to Zaller's analysis, but not structured as direct tests of his model. For example, Russell J. Dalton, Paul A. Beck and Robert Huckfeldt (1998) examined the relationship between newspaper coverage of the 1992 presidential campaign and survey respondents' vote intentions, but took no account of the volume of newspaper coverage, of possible interactions between partisan predispositions and coverage, or of the potential conditioning effect of political awareness. The closest they came to directly applying Zaller's model was in an analysis relating perceptions of the partisan leanings of local newspapers to actual (editorial and news) content and the respondents' own partisanship among more and

This is only the most striking of a variety of respects in which the scholarly response to Zaller's book seems to be notably inconsistent with an idealized view of how scientific classics get made. In "rational reconstructions" of the scientific process, theories are rigorously scrutinized for logical cogency and empirical validity before they achieve widespread acceptance and application. However, there is rather little evidence of that in the case of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*.⁷ Indeed, there has been very little actual take-up of the theoretical framework set out in the book. While scholars have frequently invoked Zaller in the course of presenting and interpreting relationships between political information and opinion, his complex non-linear model, with interacting "reception" and "acceptance" functions (and various Ptolemaic "floor parameters," "recall functions," and "inertial resistance" measures necessary to make the model fit the data), has largely fallen by the wayside. Most citations, even in the first decade following publication, seem to have appealed to Zaller as evidence rather than subjecting his work to the sort of intense critical scrutiny that is often taken to be the hallmark of the scientific process. As one brief survey of the literature put it, "there is surprisingly little empirical research where the

less "attentive" subgroups. Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998, 121) interpreted the results of this analysis as providing "limited" support for Zaller's reception axiom—though it is hard to see why, since perceptions were only weakly related to actual content among the most attentive respondents, but twice as strongly related among those who said they paid only "some" attention to the campaign.

⁷ For example, I am not aware of any published discussion of a notable logical failing of Zaller's model of opinion change—the fact that successive receipt of two separate messages produces a different effect than receipt of a single message with the same (combined) content. Since the division of elite discourse into distinct "messages" is essentially arbitrary, one would wish for a model in which the same content produced the same expected effect regardless of whether it was analyzed piecemeal or in combination. On the analogous property of sequential coherence in the Bayesian model of opinion change see, for example, Phillips (1973, 64-67).

main purpose is to directly test Zaller's theoretical framework" (Dobrzynska and Blais 2008, 261).⁸

Of course, this fact should not be taken as a criticism of Zaller's book, but as a criticism of an idealized view of the scientific process. Fortunately, real science is much more broadminded—and much less absorbed with efforts to “falsify” useful theories—than one might guess from the antique positivism retailed in methods texts. As Donald N. McCloskey (1994, 104) put it, “The varied rules of human debate, not godlike Tests, decide the outcome.” In Zaller's case, the enormous sustained impact of his book owes much less to rigorous critical vetting of his model than to his brilliant success in synthesizing a wide swath of existing theoretical and empirical work, his clear and engaging exposition of complex ideas, and the appealing balance he managed to strike between grand intellectual ambition and frank acknowledgement of daunting theoretical and empirical limitations.

Occasionally, scholars have questioned the details of Zaller's account of elite influence. For example, in his 2009 study of public opinion toward war, Adam J. Berinsky (2009, 66, 69) began by endorsing the notion “that elite discourse is the key to explaining war support,” but argued that “Zaller's explanation is incomplete” because it implied that public “opposition to a conflict emerges only as a result of a clear message in elite rhetoric.” Noting that well-informed Democrats seemed to take President Bush's support for the Iraq War as grounds to oppose it, even in the absence of a clear “polarizing” cue from their own party elites, Berinsky suggested that a somewhat broader “elite cue theory” could better account for “the polarized pattern of

⁸ Agnieszka Dobrzynska and André Blais (2008, 259) portrayed their own findings as providing “little support for the model.” They also interpreted analyses by Dalton, Beck and Huckfeldt (1998) and Paul Goren (2004) as tending to disconfirm aspects of Zaller's theory.

opinion surrounding the war” (ibid., 70). However, he chose not to “directly test the elite cue theory against Zaller’s” and acknowledged that “the two theories are quite similar” (ibid.).

A few scholars have turned the flexibility of Zaller’s theoretical structure to their own purposes. For example, Robert Huckfeldt and John Sprague (1995, 290), in a book-length analysis of political influence within neighborhoods, social groups, and personal networks, noted that “Zaller is concerned with information obtained from political elites, but his argument is not fundamentally different from our own. Namely, people exercise incomplete control over incoming information, and they may or may not reject information that, from an objective viewpoint, is in disagreement with their own interests and predispositions.”

Even more rarely, critics have directly challenged Zaller’s emphasis on elite influence. For example, Taeku Lee (2002, 191, 189), in his book on *Mobilizing Public Opinion* in the Civil Rights era, argued for a “‘movement-initiated, movement-elite interactive’ account of activated mass opinion” in contrast to Zaller’s “paradigmatic contemporary rendition” of “elite theories of mass opinion.” Like Zaller, Lee looked for the roots of shifting public opinion on racial matters in the decades preceding the historic events of the 1960s. However, whereas Zaller relied on “a few selective historical references in support of focal elite events” (Lee 2002, 46), Lee’s account emphasized grass-roots agency and “The Racial, Regional, and Organizational Bases of Mass Activation” from the late 1940s through the mid-1960s (ibid., chap. 5). And, having “made the case for one historically contained case” to his own satisfaction, Lee (ibid., 199-200) argued more broadly for an account of public opinion “in which the mass electorate, under certain historical, institutional, and ideological circumstances,

can mobilize their [sic] collective grievances and play an active role in the crafting of democratic politics.”

Zaller Post-Zaller

A scholar whose first solely authored book is a field-defining classic might be expected to spend much of his subsequent career maintaining the franchise, defending his work from criticism and multiplying applications of the same framework in closely related settings. Zaller has done remarkably little of that. Having established himself as a master of survey-data analysis, he has spent most of the past twenty years emphasizing the scientific limitations of survey data, while striving to develop an even broader view of the American political system based on very different data and styles of analysis. This scholarly evolution sheds important light on both *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* and its author.

A striking snapshot of this transition is provided by Zaller’s two contributions to an edited volume on the media, public opinion, and U.S. foreign policy in the 1991 Gulf War (Bennett and Paletz 1994). The first of these contributions, a chapter on “Elite Leadership of Mass Opinion: New Evidence from the Gulf War” (Zaller 1994a), offers a straightforward summary of ideas from *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* and an application of those ideas to public opinion in the run-up to the Gulf War. Figures from the book illustrating the “mainstream” and “polarization” effects are juxtaposed with parallel analyses of poll data on the public’s views about sending troops to Saudi Arabia, military action in Iraq, and President Bush’s handling of the crisis.

All of this seems quite familiar. However, the chapter ends with a two-page coda asking “How Much Do Elites Really Lead?” There, Zaller (1994a, 202) asks “how clear is the evidence that elites are really leading mass opinion,” and answers that “there is

room for doubt.” Noting that politicians simultaneously attempt to shape and to anticipate public opinion, he concludes that

the exact combination of leading and following done by elites undoubtedly varies from case to case and from one elite actor to another, thus requiring the analyst interested in elite-mass relations to make case-by-case judgments as well. To do this, the analyst must examine more than just public opinion data. She or he must examine the dynamics of elite decision-making—in the Congress, the executive branch, the media, and in relevant policy communities—in relation to events and to public opinion about those events. (Zaller 1994a, 203-204)

This turned out to be a brief for Zaller’s second contribution to the same volume, a chapter on “Strategic Politicians, Public Opinion, and the Gulf Crisis” (Zaller 1994b). Here Zaller did exactly what he had just proposed, examining “four key decisions in the process by which the United States was led into the Gulf War, showing, to the extent possible, how calculations concerning current and future public opinion influenced each decision” (ibid., 251). This examination was based “primarily on published accounts of decision-making” and on “interviews of top staff aides to key decision-makers.” Think “Mr. Zaller Goes to Washington,” with Jimmy Stewart putting aside his logistic regression equations to knock on Capitol Hill office doors asking how politics really works. The effort is easy to parody, and Zaller himself clearly recognized its inferential limitations. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to see this as anything less than a courageous attempt to get political science off its dead ass (as Warren Miller used to say) by pushing the study of public opinion in a new, more sophisticated and politically richer direction.

Later—perhaps impertinently in the context of a *Festschrift* honoring Philip Converse—Zaller pleaded even more explicitly for “a revival” of Key’s (1961) concept of “latent opinion”—a focus not on the political views citizens actually express in opinion surveys, but the political views they are likely to form and bring to bear in the next election. While acknowledging the work of Converse and his colleagues as “a model of politically relevant political behavior research,” Zaller (2003, 312) argued that

their central concern with politics has receded from much work in political behavior. Quite often, researchers are more concerned with pure psychology, elegant statistical models, or simply a high r^2 . Hence it is worth emphasizing that, as difficult as Key’s conception of public opinion may be to implement in quantitative research, it has these important virtues: it focuses on what actually drives much of politics, which is gaining and holding public office in elections. It distinguishes electorally relevant opinion from mere survey responses, raising thereby the specter of nonattitudes. And finally, it highlights the complexity of the process by which politicians’ estimates of public opinion affect their decisions. In these ways, Key’s concept of latent opinion focuses squarely on the interaction between politicians and citizens in the democratic process, a topic that ought to be more central to the study of public opinion than it is.

Zaller’s subsequent work has mostly not drawn explicitly on the concept of “latent opinion”; but it has attempted consistently and with impressive success to embody the virtues he attributed to Key’s approach to the study of politics. After 1994 there are no more rehashings of RAS axioms or two-message models or curvilinear effects of political awareness. Rather, we see a persistent, resourceful, multifaceted attempt to put “the interaction between politicians and citizens” at the center of public opinion research.

A notable step in this evolution is a charmingly titled 1998 essay on “Monica Lewinsky’s Contribution to Political Science,” in which Zaller interpreted fluctuations in Bill Clinton’s approval ratings over the course of the Lewinsky scandal as evidence of “the importance of political substance, as against media hype, in American politics” (Zaller 1998, 182). If this sounds like a big conclusion to draw from a few weeks of polling data about public reactions to a tawdry sex scandal, it is. But this was an author on a mission—to shift the balance of scholarly power between two broad models of how politics works. One model, which Zaller referred to as “Media Politics,” focuses on “*the attempt to govern on the basis of words and images that diffuse through the mass media*” (ibid., 186; *emph. in original*). The other, which he referred to as “Party Politics,” is variously characterized as focusing on “the substance of party performance,” “peace, prosperity, and moderation,” and “the bottom line” (ibid.). Zaller went out of his way to include his own prior work in the “Media Politics” tradition, and to suggest that work in this vein “seems somewhat weaker” in light of public reactions to the Lewinsky scandal. “However poorly informed, psychologically driven, and ‘mass mediated’ public opinion may be,” he argued, “it is capable of recognizing and focusing on its own conception of what matters” (ibid.).

This is a remarkable parsing of the scientific implications of the Lewinsky episode—especially from an author who was already hard at work on a major book entitled *A Theory of Media Politics*.⁹ This intended successor to *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* focused on how “the interaction between politicians and citizens” is shaped by the professional incentives of journalists and their strategic interactions with vote-seeking politicians. In a sense, it combined Key’s emphasis on connecting

⁹ A draft of the book dated 24 October 1999, is available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/zaller/media%20politics%20book%20.pdf>.

public opinion with “the operation of the political system in the large” with the interest in professional communities inherited from Nelson Polsby and reflected in the first half of Zaller’s dissertation. Because journalists as professionals “*aspire, individually and collectively, to maximize their independent and distinctive ‘voice’ in the news,*” they find themselves in frequent conflict with politicians, who likewise strive “to control the content of the news” (Zaller 1999, 25).

Zaller explored the implications of this clash for a variety of topics, including news “quality,” variations in the media’s attention to specific candidates, the extent of negativity in press coverage, and the likely success of politicians’ efforts to “manage” the news. The manuscript—unlike *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*—is thick with painstakingly gathered data on media content, and with connections to the scholarly literature on political communication. However, the primary conclusion of Zaller’s analyses was a major embarrassment both to his data and to the existing literature on political communication: For all the emphasis on the content of the news, that content seemed to have *no discernible impact* on presidential election outcomes!¹⁰ Rather, the key factors determining voters’ behavior were “political fundamentals” such as peace, prosperity, and ideological moderation. While media politics might matter more in primary elections, even there it “by no means necessarily undercut the role of parties in presidential primaries, and may often reinforce it” (Zaller 1999, 144). Thus, in a concluding chapter asking whether, in light of the twentieth-century emergence of the mass media, politics has fundamentally changed, Zaller (*ibid.*, 134, 162) was forced to answer:

¹⁰ Actually, Zaller’s (1999, 141) measure of “Net Media Negativity” had a small but statistically significant *positive* impact on the incumbent party’s vote share.

All of politics has not changed in the era of media politics. The leaders of political parties are for the most part masters of media politics rather than its victims. . . . The United States is primarily ruled by a system of party politics rather than media politics.

While this frank and well-supported conclusion seemed to offer a spectacularly anti-climactic ending to a manuscript on “Media Politics,” it had the compensating benefit of fruitfully shaping much of Zaller’s subsequent scholarly work. Some of that work has elaborated upon the political impact of “peace, prosperity, and moderation” (e.g., Bartels and Zaller 2001; Zaller 2004). However, much of the next fifteen years of Zaller’s career would turn out to be devoted to a more detailed explication of where and how *political parties* actually figure in the contemporary system of “party politics” (Cohen et al. 2008; Hussey and Zaller 2011; Bawn et al. 2012).

What is most pertinent about Zaller’s work on party politics, for present purposes, is its emphasis on the key role of interest groups and activists in shaping party platforms and policy—and its disparagement of public opinion as a strong constraint on elected officials. “How much,” Zaller and his coauthors asked (Bawn et al. 2012, 576-577, 589), “should a party be expected to moderate its positions in deference to an electorate in which half the voters do not even know whether it or its opposition controls the government? Some, perhaps, but probably not very much. . . . [W]ithin fairly broad limits, obfuscation and phony credit claiming work quite well.”

In *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, political ideology played a key role in “constraining the scope of elite influence,” as Cindy Kam (2012) puts it in her contribution to this symposium. Citizens might be “passive receivers” of elite arguments, but their fundamental political predispositions structured their acceptance or rejection of those arguments in proportion to their levels of political awareness. However, political ideology is cast in a very different light in the theory of party

politics propounded by Zaller and his coauthors (Bawn et al. 2012, 590): “Ideology reflects a coalitional bargain among diverse policy demanders, to which some voters may also subscribe. . . . Thinking about ideology in this way draws our attention to the strategic construction of ideology as an important area of research.”

In effect, the one fundamental aspect of political identity that citizens in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion* could call their own has now been recast as a mere byproduct of elite coalition-making.

The Last Train from Purple Land

In the “epilogue” to *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Zaller stepped back from the theoretical and empirical details of his analysis to consider “The Question of Elite Domination of Public Opinion” in broader perspective.¹¹ He summarized the argument of his book, “on first inspection,” as “scarcely encouraging” (Zaller 1992, 311):

Many citizens . . . pay too little attention to public affairs to be able to respond critically to the political communications they encounter; rather, they are blown about by whatever current of information manages to develop the greatest intensity. The minority of citizens who are highly attentive to public affairs are scarcely more critical: They respond to new issues mainly on the basis of the partisanship and ideology of the elite sources of the messages.

Obviously, the implications of this account hinge significantly on those “elite sources” of political communication, the nature and origins of their “messages,” and the forces determining which “current of information manages to develop the greatest

¹¹ In his memorable preface (1992, xii), Zaller claimed that this final chapter of the book was significantly shaped by “a weekend in the woods with it, a bottle of vodka, and a laptop”—a scholarly regimen he ascribed to the influence of Donald Kinder.

intensity.” Embracing that fact, Zaller (1992, 314) cast his take on the issue of “elite domination” in the form of a parable about an imaginary polity, Purple Land, in which citizens are *entirely* dependent upon elites for their political views: “The one thing no citizen ever did was to think for himself or herself. All simply selected from the menu of elite-supplied options.”

The saving grace of Zaller’s “Purple Land” is that its political elites seem to be imported straight from the almost-equally-imaginary polity of mid-century pluralist America. Indeed, it is not hard to trace a direct line backward from Purple Land to the analysis of the role of scientists and policy specialists in the first half of Zaller’s dissertation, to the closely related work of his teacher Polsby on innovation in policy subcommunities, and thus to the roots of Polsby’s work in the comforting mid-century conjunction of pluralist political science and functionalist sociology of the professions. Indeed, although “The Parable of Purple Land” itself comprises less than two pages of Zaller’s concluding chapter, much of the rest of the chapter is devoting to portraying and—at least implicitly—defending “an idealized system of public information in which political ideas and perspectives develop among various kinds of policy specialists and diffuse downward to the public via politicians and the mass media” (Zaller 1992, 328).

In what ways is this “an idealized system”? While “policy specialists” may be conservatives or liberals, they operate within “salutary incentive structures” that “strongly emphasize the advancement of knowledge for the solution of pressing societal problems” (Zaller 1992, 328, 326). For their part, journalists feel constrained to respect and report what “‘legitimate’ sources say is newsworthy” (*ibid.*, 315). And while “the corrupting influence of partisan politics” may “override the influence of policy specialists and academic experts in the short run,” the independent influence of

politicians “should not be exaggerated” (ibid., 330). By way of example, Zaller (1992, 319) offered “an anecdotal glimpse of the workings of the subcommunity of persons specializing in questions of nuclear strategy.” The glimpse consisted of a conversation about the risk of “nuclear winter” between two experts, one liberal and the other conservative, who happened to be sitting in Zaller’s office one afternoon. After some friendly preliminaries, “the two men launched into a discussion of exactly what the incineration rates of various substances were, how much of what kinds of combustible materials are found in typical cities, and other technical parameters of the process by which nuclear winter might or might not be created. They appeared to agree on almost everything”—and, in particular, on the conclusion that nuclear winter was “basically a nonstarter” (ibid., 320). “Shortly after these events,” Zaller continued, “discussion of nuclear winter disappeared from the media and the issue was seemingly forgotten” (ibid., 321).

Lest readers rebel at the head-slapping audacity of attempting to draw meaningful conclusions from evidence of this sort, Zaller (1992, 321) acknowledged that it is “impossible to say” how often things work so happily with respect to “other issues and expert communities.” Nevertheless, he went on to offer “a preliminary but, I hope, suggestive examination of these issues” drawing on the longer case study presented in his dissertation of changing attitudes toward homosexuality. In Zaller’s telling, psychiatric research in the 1940s and 1950s “raised serious question about whether homosexuality was a form of mental illness”; and both the production of this evidence and the profession’s favorable response to it constituted “an impressive achievement . . . for the institutional arrangements that made it possible.” While acknowledging “a years’ long series of confrontations between militant gays and the American Psychiatric Association,” he argued that the scientific dilemma facing the

psychiatric profession “had eventually to be faced whether gay militants demanded it or not” (ibid., 321-325). Accepting for the sake of argument Zaller’s emphasis on the sheer weight of scientific evidence in precipitating the American Psychiatric Association’s 1974 decision to “delete homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders”—and also his assertion that more favorable press coverage “followed more or less automatically” from this shift in scientific judgment (Zaller 1992, 318)—we are still a long way from the “idealized system of public information” that Zaller envisioned as the saving grace of elite domination. After all, *decades* would pass before the APA’s enlightenment and the newly open-minded media persuaded even a bare majority of Americans to support gay rights. It seems hard to escape the conclusion that the “policy specialists” who play such a prominent and reassuring role in Purple Land are likely to be much less efficacious in the real world.

This would hardly have been a shock to the Zaller who, several years later, found that the tone of press coverage of presidential candidates had no perceptible impact on their electoral fortunes. But in *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, he seemed to *assume* that experts and journalists would sway public opinion, and that the implications for democracy hinged on their motives and messages. While acknowledging a paucity of systematic evidence on the matter, Zaller (1992, 325-326) argued that “it nonetheless seems plausible to maintain that at least some experts, professionals, and other types of subject matter specialists do often have incentive structures that strongly emphasize the advancement of knowledge for the solution of pressing societal problems. . . . Such incentive structures obviously cannot eliminate bias or guarantee correct conclusions. But they may nonetheless serve as effective inducements to try to reach these goals.” Weasel-phrases like “seems plausible,” “at least some,” and “may nonetheless” should signal to attentive readers that we are on

thin ice here. Zaller was clearly pushing his argument as far as it would go in the comforting direction of seeing public opinion shaped by a benign system of “expert” leadership.

If anything, the evolution of American political culture over the past twenty years strongly suggests that the ice is getting even thinner than it was when Zaller made his vodka-soaked excursion to Purple Land—that “expert communities” are becoming less well-insulated from the political process and less influential, even indirectly, in shaping citizens’ views about politics and public policy than they were in the less polarized 1970s and 1980s, much less in the “idealized system of public information” characterizing Purple Land. Consider, for example, the question of whether the (physical, not metaphorical) ice is getting thinner. There is a great deal of consensus among scientific “experts” regarding the nature and causes of global climate change, but that consensus has been firmly resisted by large swathes of the political class and the public.¹² Even the decades-long time scale for translating expertise into

¹² On the scientific consensus see, for example, the reports cited in a 2010 press release from the National Academies of Science: “STRONG EVIDENCE ON CLIMATE CHANGE UNDERSCORES NEED FOR ACTIONS TO REDUCE EMISSIONS AND BEGIN ADAPTING TO IMPACTS” (<http://www8.nationalacademies.org/onpinews/newsitem.aspx?RecordID=05192010>). The 2012 Republican Party platform “flatly opposes ‘any and all cap and trade legislation’ to curtail greenhouse gases. It demands that Congress ‘take quick action to prohibit the EPA from moving forward with new greenhouse gas regulations.’ It criticizes the Obama administration’s National Security Strategy for ‘elevat[ing] “climate change” to the level of a “severe threat” equivalent to foreign aggression.’” And it echoes a 2009 op-ed piece by Paul Ryan accusing climate scientists “of using ‘statistical tricks to distort their findings and intentionally mislead the public on the issue of climate change’” (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/wp/2012/08/30/gop-platform-highlights-the-partys-drastic-shift-on-energy-climate-issues/>). Meanwhile, a series of seven public opinion surveys conducted between 2008 and 2012 found an average of 26% of the public denying that there is “solid evidence that the average temperature on earth has been getting warmer over the past four decades,” and another 13% unsure, with no clear trend over time (<http://www.brookings.edu/~media/Research/Files/Papers/2012/6/11%20climate%20rabe%20>

effective public pressure for policy change suggested by Zaller’s descriptions of the racial justice and gay rights cases may be optimistic in the current political climate. If it is, the public may be under water long before it converges on a “mainstream” opinion consistent with experts’ understanding of the problem of climate change.

Or consider the politics of economic policy in the wake of the Great Recession. Here, even the “experts” seem to disagree about many of the key scientific issues. Notwithstanding those professional “incentive structures that strongly emphasize the advancement of knowledge for the solution of pressing societal problems,” the ideological bickering and name-calling extend into the ranks of Nobel laureates. Moreover, when experts with contrasting ideological predispositions *do* come to agreement—as they mostly have regarding the economic impact of the 2009 stimulus package—their views seem to have little sway over a public that mostly continues to believe what it wants to believe.¹³ According to one prominent economist, “I’ve never

borick/NSAPOCC_Belief_Spring%20Formatted.pdf). Public support for the notion that global warming is attributable in significant part to human activity is even lower.

¹³ In a 2010 report on “How the Great Recession Was Brought to an End” (<http://www.economy.com/mark-zandi/documents/end-of-great-recession.pdf>) Alan Blinder and Mark Zandi estimated that fiscal stimulus (of which the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 was by far the biggest component) increased real GDP in 2010 by 3.5 percent and lowered the unemployment rate by 1.4 percentage points, helping to avert what would otherwise have been “a much deeper slump.” As a *USA Today* story reporting their findings noted, “If President Obama expected anyone to say, ‘Thank you,’ however, he’s been disappointed. In a recent *USA Today*/Gallup Poll, 59 percent of respondents disapproved of the president’s handling of the economy. In the partisan war over the economy’s performance, the word ‘stimulus’ has become [*sic*] synonymous with ‘boondoggle’” (http://www.usatoday.com/money/economy/2010-08-30-stimulus30_CV_N.htm). A 2012 survey of 41 “distinguished experts with a keen interest in public policy from the major areas of economics” (http://www.igmchicago.org/igm-economic-experts-panel/poll-results?SurveyID=SV_cw5O9LNJL1oz4Xi) found 33 agreeing that the unemployment rate at the end of 2010 was lower than it would have been without the 2009 stimulus package (while only two disagreed) and 19 agreeing that the “the benefits of the stimulus will end up exceeding its costs” (while five disagreed; the rest indicated that they were “uncertain” or did not answer). A Pew poll conducted the same month found that 41 percent of the public disapproved of the

seen the disjunction between the political debate about economics and the consensus of economists be as large as it is today. And I think this is incredibly damaging” (Wolfers 2012).

The 2012 presidential election campaign inspired a great deal of discussion—especially among journalists and pundits—about the extent to which they had lost their traditional role as truth-tellers and referees in the partisan political debate. “Fact checkers” complained about increasingly brazen misrepresentations in the candidates’ speeches, debates, and ads, but to no apparent avail.¹⁵ As one philosophy professor put it, “the public’s trust in public speech, whether by politicians or in the media, has disintegrated, and to such a degree that it has undermined the possibility of straightforward communication in the public sphere. The expectation is that any statement made either by a politician or by a media outlet is a false ideological distortion” (Stanley 2012). If that is right, it turns the “Resistance Axiom” at the heart of Zaller’s model of opinion change on its head: rather than resisting elite arguments only to the extent that they are recognized as ideologically uncongenial, citizens may increasingly resist even “mainstream” messages, even when the citizens themselves are not sufficiently “politically aware” to assess those messages critically. Obviously, this

stimulus, while only 37 percent approved (<http://www.people-press.org/2012/02/23/auto-bailout-now-backed-stimulus-divisive/?src=prc-headline>).

¹⁵ For example, Alec MacGillis (<http://www.tnr.com/blog/plank/106197/the-welfare-card-and-the-post-truth-campaign>) characterized Mitt Romney’s “calling out Obama for weakening welfare work requirements” as “a blatant and knowing lie” characteristic of “The Post-Truth Campaign.” Sally Kohn (<http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2012/08/30/paul-ryans-speech-in-three-words/>) called Paul Ryan’s vice presidential acceptance speech “an apparent attempt to set the world record for the greatest number of blatant lies and misrepresentations slipped into a single political speech.” Ezra Klein (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/ezra-klein/wp/2012/08/30/a-not-very-truthful-speech-in-a-not-very-truthful-campaign/>) complained that, “Quite simply, the Romney campaign isn’t adhering to the minimum standards required for a real policy conversation.”

is a far cry from the “idealized system of public information” portrayed by Zaller—and from the “glory days” of the mid-twentieth century when “the news media were one of America’s most trusted institutions” (Ladd 2012, 3, 1).

Where does that leave us? If the train from Purple Land is no longer running, Zaller’s portrait of a public subject to benign “elite domination” may have to be replaced by an even less reassuring view of the role of public opinion in “the operation of the political system in the large.” The concluding paragraph of Zaller’s most recent published work (Bawn et al. 2012, 591) provides a sobering—albeit appropriately tentative—example of what such a view might look like:

Perhaps in a society in which politics is complicated and most citizens are too busy with their lives to pay much attention, group-centric parties are the best that can be realistically hoped for. Perhaps then giving society’s most intense policy demanders a semi-institutionalized position at the heart of government is a better way of insuring that all points of view are heard than relying on the insipid discourse of mass politics for this purpose. . . . We are not sure.

In the concluding paragraph of *The Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, Zaller (1992, 332) acknowledged that his analysis “assumes, of course, that an independent public opinion can actually check political authorities. Given the continued existence of competition among partisan elites for public support in the current American political system, I do not see this assumption as particularly problematic.” However, the subsequent two decades seem to have dented his optimism about the extent to which “the insipid discourse of mass politics” can provide an effective check on authorities in a political world dominated by “obfuscation and phony credit claiming” and constant vigilance and pressure from “intense policy demanders.” This apparent evolution of

Zaller's views is a testament to his open-mindedness and intellectual seriousness.

Perhaps it should also be a wake-up call to scholars of political behavior—a challenge to shift our focus from the nature and origins of mass opinion to “competition among partisan elites” and “the operation of the political system in the large.”

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