

## Public Opinion

Narcissus was captivated by his reflection in a pool; Americans today seem obsessed with their reflections in the polls. Opinion surveys have been conducted on a “scientific” basis for more than 40 years. They are widely used by academics, corporations, politicians. Yet contradictions and imponderables remain. What effect do polls have on political life? When should they be trusted? How useful are they? “The people’s voice is odd,” Alexander Pope once wrote. Here *Public Opinion* editors David Gergen and William Schambra look at polling’s past and present; and analyst Everett Carl Ladd, Jr. offers his views on what Americans are thinking—and how their thinking has changed.



### POLLSTERS AND POLLING

*by David Gergen and William Schambra*

America, so it seems, is under siege. Armies of men and women, equipped with clipboards and pencils, sweep across the land, prying and probing into people’s minds. The results are served up in hundreds of public opinion surveys for newspapers, TV networks, corporate managers, cabinet officers, and White House staffers.

Consider just a few of the questions that have been put to people in recent months:

¶ Do you believe in Unidentified Flying Objects? George Gallup recently asked. (Fifty-seven percent now say yes, compared to only 46 percent 12 years ago.)

¶ What food do you like best? That question came from Burns Roper, who found 61 percent naming American food, only 9 percent selecting French.

¶ Which is stronger, Louis Harris wanted to know, the

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United States or the Soviet Union? (For the first time in history, a plurality of Americans say the Russians are second to none.)

¶ Will you wind up in heaven or hell? The Iowa Poll found that nearly all Iowans believe they will be saved, but one-third of them describe a neighbor as a “sure bet” for hell.\*

The only question pollsters rarely seem to ask is: What do you think of polls? Proctor and Gamble did ask once. It found that people had less confidence in pollsters than in the military or organized labor but more than in the President or Congress. Hardly a ringing vote of confidence, but even George Gallup, the dean of the profession, would argue that some skepticism is justified. Too often poll results are distorted or misinterpreted. In 1972, for example, an early *Boston Globe* survey showed Edmund Muskie leading George McGovern in the New Hampshire Democratic presidential primary, 65 to 18 percent. Although preprimary polls are notoriously unreliable, some reporters seized upon the 65 percent figure as Muskie’s benchmark. When the Maine Senator defeated McGovern by a tidy 46 to 37 percent, McGovern, not Muskie, was declared the real “winner.”

### Birth of the Polls

Although such tales—and there are many of them—may reflect more on the use of polls than on the polls themselves, the surveys, too, have their limits. The numbers are never exact. Slight differences in the wording of questions may dramatically affect the outcome. The forces that *shape* public opinion—Presidents, the media, political parties, “feelings”—have yet to be sorted out with much precision.

Nonetheless, the polls deserve to be studied with care. There

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\*The Gallup poll on UFOs was taken March 3–6, 1978. The food survey is from *Roper Reports*, 78-9, September 23–30, 1978. For surveys on the relative strengths of the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., see Harris surveys taken in December 1976 and July and November 1978. The Iowa Poll was taken in August 1977.

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are many reputable surveys; when read properly, they can tell us much. Even misinterpreted polls deserve our attention if their findings are widely heeded. In short, the polls, like television, have taken too firm a grip on our perceptions to be ignored.

America's current interest in polls has deep historical roots. Driven by the practical needs of politicians in search of voters, newspapers in search of readers, and businessmen in search of customers, Americans have been taking surveys for more than 150 years. The first political poll was published in 1824, after the *Harrisburg Pennsylvanian* surveyed the citizens of Wilmington, Delaware, "without Discrimination of Parties," on their preference for President. It showed Andrew Jackson was the two-to-one favorite over John Quincy Adams. The *Raleigh* (North Carolina) *Star* later showed Jackson with a seven-to-one lead. Old Hickory lost the election, however, and would probably have scoffed at the "bandwagon" theory—the controversial notion that high poll ratings attract additional support to a candidate. (Few pollsters today take the idea seriously.)

Politicians soon began to canvass potential voters in order to plan their campaign strategies. Political canvasses sought only party identification, not attitudes, but they were considered so valuable that, in 1896, the Republican National Committee spent \$3.5 million for the most thorough voter survey ever undertaken. Long after 1896, Republicans enjoyed safe majorities, and such polls no longer seemed necessary; Democrats were usually too poor to afford them.

Newspaper editors, meanwhile, smelled a good story. During the 1880s and '90s, they had begun taking "straw polls," sampling whoever was handy in street cars, trains, and local taverns. In 1883, General Charles H. Taylor, editor of the *Boston Globe*, devised an election-night reporting system to project statewide winners and losers based on voting returns from selected precincts—just as television networks do now. Soon the *Globe* was joined in the straw-polling business by the *New York Herald Tribune*, the *St. Louis Republic*, and the *Los Angeles Times*. Straw polling reached its peak in the 1920s and the '30s.

### A New Breed

The most famous straw poll in history was taken in 1936 by a popular weekly magazine, *Literary Digest*. The *Digest* mailed out 10 million sample presidential ballots (along with magazine subscription blanks) to Americans who owned telephones or automobiles—in short, to a relatively affluent minority. But they failed to recognize this inherent upper-class (and Republi-

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can) bias. When the *Digest's* projected winner, Republican Alf Landon, came in on Election Day well behind Democrat Franklin Roosevelt and 19 points below the poll's projected result, straw polling was finished as a serious undertaking.

But better days for polling lay ahead.

In 1935, three of the fathers of modern techniques—George Gallup, Archibald Crossley, and Elmo Roper—independently began taking new kinds of surveys based on the “scientific” findings of psychologists, statisticians, and market researchers. Gallup's organization was a direct outgrowth of his doctoral thesis on sampling techniques. (He was also the personal pollster for his mother-in-law in 1932; that fall she became the first woman elected Secretary of State in Iowa history.)

In the hands of this new breed, random sampling and sophisticated data analysis became standard practice. The pollsters did suffer one further disaster—the projection by Gallup and others of a victory by Dewey over Truman in the 1948 presidential election—but for the most part, the industry has been marked by steady growth. In recent years, growth has been spectacular. According to a Census Bureau official, American firms and research organizations spent \$4 billion on opinion polls for political, commercial, or scholarly purposes in 1978.

### Who Asks What?

Today there are more than a half-dozen well-established, commercial U.S. firms that take public opinion polls. Among the most respected are Gallup, Harris, Yankelovich, Sindlinger, the Opinion Research Corporation, Roper, and Cambridge Research Reports. There are also two independent survey units at universities (the National Opinion Research Center, or NORC, at the University of Chicago and the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan). In recent years, the three commercial networks, along with the *New York Times* (in conjunction with CBS News), the *Washington Post* (initially with the Associated Press), and the *Los Angeles Times*, have also begun national polling, even between election years, and have either formed their own polling staffs or hired university professors as consultants.

All of these represent only the *public* side of the industry.

There are also many companies, such as Audits and Surveys in New York City, that work strictly for commercial clients—advertisers, manufacturers, and marketing specialists. Indeed, the real profits in the opinion industry are in commercial polling. Most of the major pollsters make little or nothing on their public polls but gross high sums for exclusive surveys—on



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Even federal census-takers had trouble getting answers, as shown in this 1880 woodcut. During the Gilded Age, politicians and newspaper publishers began taking "straw-poll" surveys of their own—generally consisting of unsophisticated "man-in-the-street" interviews. Today, the refusal rate for pollsters' interviews is high and growing.

toothpaste, detergent, new movies—conducted under private contract. In addition, they earn considerable sums by providing private (or proprietary) reports to commercial clients on a subscription basis. For example, Cambridge Research Reports, headed by President Carter's chief polling adviser, Patrick Caddell, sells a series of four private surveys a year at a cost of \$20,000 per subscriber.

There are a dozen or so reputable state polls—Mervin Field of California and the Iowa Poll are among the best—and scores of small commercial firms, not to mention the half-dozen major political pollsters whose services are considered *de rigueur* for any serious candidate for high office.\*

The federal government has also become a major sponsor of surveys in recent years. Franklin Roosevelt was the first President to recognize their potential utility. In 1939, he signed on Hadley Cantril, a Princeton psychologist, to monitor public opinion on the war in Europe. Roosevelt's concern was how to prepare Americans for a war they did not want.

Under pressure from conservative Congressmen, most of the government's polling activities were halted after V-J Day, and occupants of the White House thereafter showed little interest in

\* Prospective candidates for the 1980 presidential nominations have already begun lining up pollsters: Ronald Reagan is consulting with Richard Wirthlin, John Connally with Lance Torrance, George Bush with Robert Teeter, and President Carter with Patrick Caddell.

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their revival until the arrival of John F. Kennedy. Louis Harris had served as a personal pollster for Kennedy in the 1960 campaign, and JFK carried his interest in polls into the Oval Office. Lyndon Johnson was a noted devotee, frequently fishing newspaper clippings of current poll results from his back pocket to remind visiting diplomats and White House reporters of what the "people" thought of him. (He discontinued the practice when his popularity ratings fell below the 50 percent mark.)

Today, polling is flourishing in Washington again. Over the past two years, scores of major surveys have been commissioned by federal agencies (though the congressional watchdog, the General Accounting Office, has recently questioned whether officials fully understand the results). The polling industry has also spread to other nations: Both Gallup and Harris have international affiliates (Gallup has 26, from Finland and Spain to India and Brazil), and indigenous firms have also sprung up. Political use of polls has stirred such intense controversy in France that the National Assembly acted in 1977 to ban publication of voting surveys during the week before election day. Authoritarian regimes in several Third World countries have begun to commission private polls in order to stay in touch with—or manipulate—"the public pulse." No doubt Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi wishes there had been a George Gallup in Iran.

### What to Look For

Professional pollsters are not immune to controversies within their own ranks. How accurate are the polls? How can they be improved? Many of these debates on methods are comprehensible only to statisticians and psychologists. That doesn't necessarily mean, however, that laymen can't tell a good survey from a bad one. Here are some things to look for.

*Method of Sampling.* A few newspapers, like the *Chicago Sun Times* and the *New York Daily News*, continue to take straw polls before elections. All claim a long record of success. It was a *Sun Times* straw ballot that supposedly alerted Senator Charles Percy to his re-election troubles in Illinois and spurred him into an extraordinary (and successful) campaign effort in 1978. Serious researchers believe, nonetheless, that straw ballots lack credibility, and no professional pollster uses them today. Not without reason: In one recent election, an Illinois straw poll was right on the overall outcome of the election but wrong on every district in the state.

The most reliable method is "random sampling." Working

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with census tracts and computers, survey firms randomly select the districts that are to be canvassed, the homes within the districts, and even the adults within the homes. No one is chosen because of any personal characteristic (e.g., race, sex, age, or religion); geography is the only variable. Every major commercial firm and university research unit now uses random sampling.

### **Beware of Breakdowns**

*Sample Size.* Most national polls include the opinions of approximately 1500 people. Working with the laws of probability, statisticians have determined that, 95 percent of the time, a random survey of 1500 persons will produce results that have a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent. In other words, a survey of 1500 people showing that 55 percent favor passage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) means that if the same poll were repeated 20 times, it would in 19 instances show support for ERA between 52 and 58 percent; in the 20th instance, the level of support would probably be above or below that range.

Dictates of economy as well as probability have led to the choice of a 1500-person sample for most national and state polls. To increase the size raises the cost without a corresponding decrease in the margin of error; decreasing the size of the sample lowers the cost but raises the margin of error to intolerable levels. A random sample of 400 respondents, for example, has a margin of error of plus or minus 6 percent, so great that many observers would dismiss the poll results as meaningless.

For the same reason, the reader of national polls should be wary of opinion breakdowns by region, age, race, and so on. A random national poll of 1500 adults, for instance, will include only about 175 blacks; reports on their attitudes will be subject to a margin of error of 8 to 10 percent. (To correct for that deficiency, some polls sample a much larger total in order to produce more reliable numbers on subgroups.)

*Type of Interview.* The polling profession is divided on interviewing. Most professionals once thought that in-person interviews were more reliable—in part because they avoided the bias inherent in questioning only those households rich enough to afford a telephone. (Ten percent of U.S. white households and 15 percent of nonwhite households still do not have telephones.) In recent years, the costs of person-to-person interviewing have skyrocketed; so has the refusal rate for doorstep interviews (it often exceeds 20 percent). Almost to a man, the pollsters have crossed over to telephone interviews.

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*The Pollster.* One of the most delicate questions in the polling profession is whom to trust. Deservedly or not, George Gallup has long been respected within the profession as the straightest pollster of the lot. While some of his critics claim that his surveys reflect an overly optimistic view of the public mood, the majority of survey professionals place considerable faith in his results. Louis Harris also commands respect; his questions are among the most imaginative in the profession. But to some, his polls are tainted by past alliances with John F. Kennedy and the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Harris also tends to be pessimistic about the currents of American opinion, frequently focusing on what he sees as rising alienation.

### **Do People Lie?**

The team of Yankelovich, Skelly, and White is enormously influential, and Daniel Yankelovich himself, a professor of psychology at Columbia University, is regarded as one of the most discerning men in the profession. Another leading figure, Albert Sindlinger, has attracted critics for his economic theories on monetary supply and household incomes, but many politicians, such as Richard Nixon, John Connally, and (reportedly) Thomas P. O'Neill have paid close attention to his overnight political telephone surveys.

Outside the commercial firms, the two major university research units—NORC at Chicago and the Survey Research Center at Michigan—have sterling reputations. Their shortcoming, if one can call it that, is that some of their data only becomes available several months after it is gathered.

*Interpreting the Polls.* Even if one has a random poll of 1500 respondents conducted by a responsible organization, determining the significance of that particular survey can be tricky. One critical factor is the way a question is asked. In an important 1975 essay, "The Wavering Polls," sociologist Seymour Martin Lipset points out that, in 1953, two surveys taken by NORC showed a 37 percent variation in assessments of the Korean conflict. In August, NORC asked: "As things stand now, do you feel the war in Korea has been worth fighting, or not?" Only 27 percent said yes. But a month later, when NORC asked whether "the United States was right or wrong" to have sent in troops, 64 percent said the policy was right. The second question, in effect, tested "patriotism," not attitudes on a specific topic.

More recently, anyone who has followed the fortunes of President Carter has seen that his popularity at any given moment may vary by as much as 20 points, with Gallup nearly

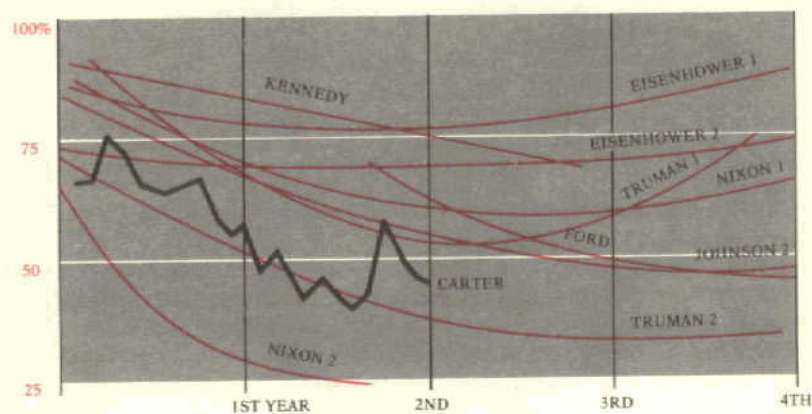


### THE PRESIDENT AND THE POLLS

From 1945 on, Gallup pollsters have asked people how they think the President is doing his job. The "approval curves" (below) for all Presidents from Truman to Ford tell the same story. Each President begins with great popularity; the trend from there is gently downward, with occasional, short-lived sharp ups and downs. Finally, toward the end of his term, barring death or resignation, the approval curve turns up slightly: "He wasn't so bad after all." As added consolation, every President can count on being on the "Ten Most Admired People" list from inauguration until death. Even Richard Nixon was back on this chart in 1977 after a three-year absence.

The upward "blips" in a President's approval curve can often be traced to the so-called rally-'round-the-flag effect. Whenever the President acts decisively or is involved in an international crisis, he can expect a sharp increase in support. Examples are numerous: Truman after the Berlin blockade (1948); Eisenhower after the U-2 incident (1960); Kennedy after the Bay of Pigs (1961); Johnson after sending troops to the Dominican Republic (1965); Nixon after the Cambodia invasion (1970); Ford after the *Mayaguez* incident (1975). Unfortunately, from the White House viewpoint, such sharp upturns are generally transitory and have little effect on the long-term slide.

So far, President Carter's popularity appears to be following the classic pattern. He took office with a 75 percent approval rating that has since fallen steadily—with no sharp drops—to 42 percent (January 1979). On one occasion—after the 1978 Camp David summit talks—his approval rating climbed suddenly by about 17 points, but within months it sank back into a slowly falling curve.



Source: "Public Support for American Presidents: A Cyclical Model," by James A. Stinson, in *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Spring 1976; *Public Opinion*, March–April 1978, November–December 1978.

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always showing the highest ratings and NBC/AP the lowest. The range reflects both differences in question wording and how people's attitudes are categorized by the survey firm. Harris, for instance, asks people if the President is doing an "excellent, pretty good, only fair, or a poor job," and then counts "only fair" as a negative response. Critics have argued that "fair" may be high praise from, say, a taciturn New Englander.

In 1978, the *Washington Post*, in consultation with Gary Orren, a political scientist, tested Carter's popularity more extensively. The newspaper found that a large number of people had mixed feelings; they neither fully approved nor fully disapproved but, depending on the way a question was worded, could be counted in one column or the other.

Such mixed feelings create a second, nontechnical kind of problem in interpreting the polls: When people answer a question, do they really know what they are talking about? Or do they simply throw out an answer—perhaps the answer they think is expected of them—in order to appear well informed or just to get rid of the interviewer?

No one knows. Yet the history of polling fairly brims with incidents that give one pause. Roper found in 1964 that many people would not admit to an interviewer that they planned to vote for presidential candidate Barry Goldwater; Goldwater did four percentage points better when people were given secret ballots. Again in 1964, the Survey Research Center discovered that 64 percent of adults polled remembered voting for John F. Kennedy in 1960 (when Kennedy gleaned only 50 percent of the vote). In the post-Watergate era, a similar phenomenon attends people who cast their ballot for Nixon but disavow it today. Indeed, if people had actually voted the way they now claim to have voted, George McGovern might have won. He certainly would have carried California.

### Views of Katmandu

Our own experience suggests that when people answer questions dealing with *personal experience*, their views tend to be well considered, lending the poll results more credence. Thus, when 54 percent of respondents told Louis Harris in 1969 that drinking was a very serious problem in the United States, and when that number increased to 76 percent in 1977, the change was a signal that something significant was happening in people's drinking habits—or, at least, in their views of drinking.

In sharp contrast, polls that ask people what the United States ought to do in a far-flung corner of the globe, such as

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Afghanistan, deserve little serious attention. A large number probably think Afghanistan is in Africa. While the public's instincts have generally proved to be sound over the years, the information base of the average American should not be overestimated. In 1964, 62 percent of Americans surveyed thought the Soviet Union was a member of NATO. And as recently as last February, 77 percent of those surveyed in a *New York Times*/CBS News poll could not identify the two nations involved in the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks. (Nevertheless, 63 percent favored a new SALT treaty.)

### Questions in a Vacuum

Daniel Yankelovich cautions that because of the malleability of public opinion on foreign policy, it is far more important for Washington policy makers to understand the general sentiments that guide the public than to heed their views on specific problems. For example, Americans today are firmly opposed to engaging in "another Vietnam" but, at the same time, are also opposed to Russian adventurism. White House planners would be well advised to take both attitudes into account.

A further caveat is that surveys must be seen in context. A nationwide Roper poll in 1978 reported that in the event mainland China invaded Taiwan, only 16 percent would favor the use of American troops. Considered in isolation, it would be easy to interpret this result to mean that the public's commitment to the U.S. defense treaty with Taiwan is tenuous at best.

If the poll is read in the context of other surveys, however, one quickly realizes that most people do not want to send U.S. troops *anywhere* in defense of sworn allies. A Gallup survey of April 1975 found that only if Canada were invaded would a majority (57 percent) back troop commitments; a bare 37 percent said they would support sending troops to England and 27 percent to West Germany.

Having said this, we have probably left the impression that Americans are now unwilling to defend their allies. Again: look at the context. Any question on troop commitment is hypothetical. Once a real crisis arises, attitudes can change quickly. On the eve of the 1970 U.S. entry into Cambodia, for example, the Harris Poll found that only 7 percent favored sending U.S. forces into that country, while 59 percent were opposed. But after President Nixon actually sent in the troops, 50 percent told Harris that Nixon was right, and only 43 percent expressed doubts. The interplay between the President and public opinion is enormous: he can shape it, but, of course, it may break him.

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Somewhere between the polls asking about personal experiences and polls asking about attitudes toward Katmandu are those dealing with domestic issues such as inflation, taxation, unemployment, hospital costs, and the like. These, too, merit caution. When surveys gauging "consumer confidence" show a sharp, downward plunge over a period of months, they should send an immediate signal to Congress and the White House that a recession may lie ahead. But a survey showing that the public, 85 percent to 15 percent, favors a constitutional amendment to balance the budget should be treated with care. People are probably *not* demanding the suggested solution—one they may not have thought much about; instead, they are demanding that their leaders do something, *anything*, to control inflation.

It may seem after all these caveats that survey research can't give us a solid indication of what people are thinking. And American politicians and newsmen have developed an appetite for polls that should probably be curbed. Poll-worship short-circuits those institutions—the President, Congress, and Supreme Court—that were established precisely because public opinion on many issues is ill formed or difficult to discern. Seymour Martin Lipset argued for this sober view of polling when he counseled "humility, caution, and recognition of complexity" for all those involved in survey work. If the public, and its leaders, recognize these constraints, he wrote, we might restore the role of judgment and active leadership in decision-making, "rather than the pattern of leaders following followers, which is currently so prevalent."

There is still an important place for polling in American affairs. In a democracy, it is vital for the elected leadership to recognize long-term, deep-seated trends in public opinion. Are people pessimistic or optimistic about the future? Are people confident or worried about our status as a world power? Are people satisfied or dissatisfied with their financial situation?

Surveys on topics such as these won't, and shouldn't, tell our leaders how many ICBMs they should concede to Moscow in the next round of SALT. But these polls will keep us tuned in to the general level of health—or disease—in the body politic and give us some sense of what Americans will support.



## WHAT THE POLLS TELL US

*by Everett Carll Ladd, Jr.*

Public opinion is highly volatile and complex. Fissures open up—only to close months later. Most people adopt “liberal” positions on some issues, “conservative” ones on others; Edmund Burke may have been right when he called public opinion a coquette.

On a national level, unpredictable left/right divisions are tantalizing: Americans seem immune to neat pigeonholing by political scientists. For example, a 1978 *New York Times*/CBS News survey found that those who described themselves as “liberals” were far more likely than self-described “conservatives” to support sending U.S. troops and equipment to halt Soviet advances in Africa.

As we edge toward the 1980 presidential election, campaigns are being mounted from the left, right, and center. Rival organizers for Kennedy and Carter, Brown, Reagan, Connally, and others are publicly confident that their candidate’s fingers rest accurately on the public pulse. They can’t all be right.

Neither can all nonpartisan opinion researchers. But we *can* afford to be more aloof. Unlike politicians, we need not be occupied with appeasing every shift of opinion for electoral gain. We are thus freer to ponder long-term currents—the tides of public opinion, not just the transient swirls and eddies.

It is a cliché these days to say that Americans are moving away from “liberal” values and perspectives and toward a more “conservative” stance. Passage of California’s Proposition 13 by a whopping two-to-one margin last year and the subsequent nationwide “tax revolt” are frequently cited as evidence. Lewis Uhler, a political conservative who heads the National Tax Limitation Committee, argues that the new popular resistance to big government portends a challenge to the free-spending tendencies in vogue since the New Deal days. Senator George McGovern (D.-S.D.) worries that liberalism is now America’s “lost vision.”

Those who believe Americans are moving rightward can point to more than a “tax revolt.” During the Vietnam era, U.S. colleges were awash in protest demonstrations; today, career-conscious and seemingly docile students concentrate on making

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the grade. Opinion surveys show widespread concern over the perceived deterioration of the family. A 1978 Yankelovich study finds two-thirds of all Americans endorsing "more emphasis on religious beliefs."

### Up with Government

The public is also taking a much tougher stance on crime—and punishment: Seven out of 10 Americans, the highest proportion in a quarter century, support the death penalty for convicted murderers. Almost 9 out of 10 think the courts are too lenient. It is not hard to see why many politicians, pollsters, and newsmen assume that Americans are "moving right."

The only problem with the assumption is that it is fundamentally wrong.

Let's look at what I see as the more important trends.

*Big Government.* Despite a clamoring for tax cuts and a heavy dose of anti-Washington rhetoric, there is still no sign that the U.S. public wants to cut back substantially on the post-Depression spending habits of the federal government. In many instances, polls show just the opposite. In 1964, 64 percent of Americans surveyed agreed that "the government in Washington ought to help people get doctors and hospital care at low cost." By 1978, 85 percent wanted the federal government to assume this responsibility.

Over and over again, when asked if they want to cut back on spending for public services, the public today says no.\* People in all social classes, from all regions of the country, and of all political persuasions now endorse heavy outlays for most social services (such as schools, hospitals, police, environmental protection). Ninety-one percent of those who describe themselves as "working class" and 90 percent of those who say they are "upper class" maintain that we are spending either *too little* or the *right amount* "to improve the educational system." Ninety-four percent of professionals and 95 percent of unskilled workers take a

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\*One exception: some 61 percent of those polled felt government was spending too much on "welfare," which seems to be regarded as a dole for people *unwilling* to work.

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### WHAT'S RIGHT? WHO'S LEFT?

The problem of using standard labels like *liberal* or *conservative* is that liberalism/conservatism is not a simple, one-dimensional continuum. In fact, there is a series of distinct dimensions, and an individual may occupy quite different positions, relative to the general public, on each of them—"liberal," say, on domestic economic policy, "centrist" in foreign affairs, "conservative" on some cultural and lifestyle issues. It is perfectly possible—one is tempted to say *likely*—for a person to be moving in opposite directions at the same time.

For example, a 1976 *Washington Post* survey of leaders of the women's movement predictably found them well to the left on most social issues. Yet a deep respect for individual merit often pulled them perceptibly rightward. Thus 64 percent "strongly" disagreed that government should limit the amount of money a person is allowed to earn.

Similarly, U.S. professors feel strongly that there should be some sort of income "floor" for the disadvantaged; most tend to support preferential hiring for minorities. But 85 percent reject, in principle, government efforts to achieve equality of results instead of equality of opportunity.

In short, terms like liberal and conservative are *ideological* categories, but large numbers of people do not hold views that are as coherently packaged as the term *ideology* implies.

similar stand on upgrading the nation's health care. And 73 percent of grade-school-trained Americans and 81 percent of U.S. college graduates want to maintain or increase expenditures "to improve the condition of blacks."

*Civil Liberties.* Americans now frequently appear more tolerant than they did in the past. If a person wanted to make a speech in your community "against churches and religion," people were asked, "should he be allowed to speak or not?" In 1954, 37 percent of the public favored letting such a person speak; by 1977, the proportion had risen to 62 percent.

Should someone who favors "government ownership of all railroads and all big industries" be allowed to teach in a college or university? Only 33 percent said yes in 1954; two decades later, the figure was 57 percent.

*Civil Rights.* Despite some angry clashes over busing—in Boston, Cleveland, and elsewhere—Americans have become

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more supportive of the rights of minorities. In 1968, 63 percent of the U.S. public agreed that "blacks have a right to live wherever they can afford to, just like white people." Ten years later, 93 percent endorsed the right of black Americans to live anywhere they chose. Only 42 percent of the public stated in 1958 that they would vote for a qualified black for President if he were nominated by their party; by 1978, the proportion had exactly doubled.

Almost everyone now agrees (94 percent in a recent *New York Times*/CBS News poll) that barring someone from a job solely because of race is "wrong." And on the sensitive issue of interracial marriage, the proportion of those who disapproved fell from 72 percent in 1963 to the current 54 percent. In all of these areas, moreover, the attitude of Southern whites has increasingly come to mirror the opinion of the nation at large.

Granted, massive school busing to achieve a "racial balance" is unpopular—among growing numbers of blacks as well as whites. So is preferential hiring. Neither has ever been endorsed by a majority of whites, and many blacks appear to have withdrawn their support. That black and white Americans have grave doubts about some of the means used to attain the end of civil rights should not be construed as a reaction against the basic principle of egalitarianism itself. Compensatory education programs and laws curbing job discrimination receive virtually unanimous approval.

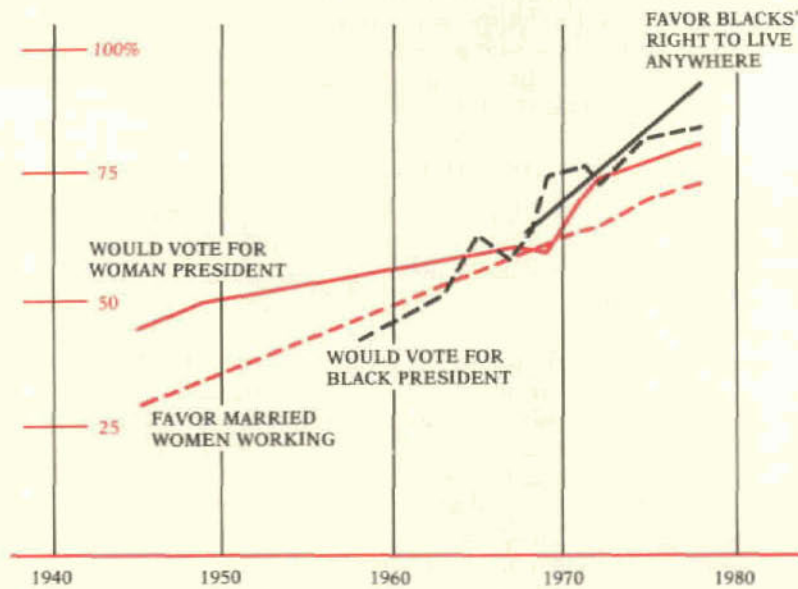
### Slippage on ERA

*Rights of Women.* Just over half of Americans surveyed in 1970 favored "most of the efforts to strengthen and change women's status in society today." By 1978, with such efforts increasing, well over two-thirds of the populace (72 percent) indicated their approval. Less than a third of the electorate was prepared to vote for a qualified woman for President in 1937; that figure has climbed to 81 percent. What about a married woman, not in financial need, going out and getting a job? Only a fifth of the public supported the idea in 1938, but almost three-quarters do four decades later.

Admittedly, support for the specific legal affirmations embodied in the proposed Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) has slipped—from 74 percent in 1974 to 58 percent in 1978. This decline in support must be seen in context. First, backing for the amendment remains widespread and strong. Second, there is evidence that the earliest surveys on ERA were picking up unconsidered positive responses to the words "equal rights," much



## CHANGING U.S. ATTITUDES



## SUPPORT FOR PUBLIC SPENDING :1978

NATIONAL	TOO LITTLE OR ABOUT RIGHT	TOO MUCH
Improving and protecting the nation's health	93%	7%
Improving and protecting the environment	90	10
Solving the problems of the big cities	78	22
Improving the conditions of blacks	73	27
<b>Welfare</b>	<b>39</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>LOCAL</b>		
Police department	87%	13%
Public hospitals	80	20
Public schools	73	27
<b>Social services (welfare, counseling, mental health, etc.)</b>	<b>53</b>	<b>47</b>

Sources: Survey Research Center, University of Michigan, 1968; *New York Times*/CBS News, February 16-19, 1978; American Institute of Public Opinion, 1937-71; Roper Organization, for *Fortune*, 1945; NORC, 1972, 1975, 1978; *Newsweek*/American Institute of Public Opinion, June 1978.

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the way people will automatically endorse "party reform" or "honesty in government." Some real slippage in ERA approval *has* occurred, as often happens when public debate matures over time. But much of the statistical drop can be attributed to the unrealistically high initial ratings—a phenomenon that also comes into play in political primary polls.

### Underlying Trends

*Personal Life.* There is markedly less opposition to premarital sex, legalized abortion, and the use of marijuana than there was a decade ago. Thirteen percent of the public in 1969 approved legalization of marijuana; 31 percent approved nine years later. Less than one-sixth of the adult population in 1969 accepted legalized abortion for a married woman who simply wanted no more children; now, 4 out of 10 adults do.

In sum, the trends of four decades belie the current view of a generalized "shift to the right." Certainly Americans are upset about welfare, busing, government inefficiency, and criminal justice. They are concerned about taxes and inflation. Yet these attitudes are best interpreted as notes of caution or dismay, not as a sweeping indictment of the interventionist state. (Most supporters of Proposition 13, for example, believed that large cutbacks in revenue *would not* result in reductions of the government services they were accustomed to.) The underlying trends of the 1960s and '70s are clear enough. And they are not conservative, in any sense of that much abused term.

The simplest way to conceive of trends in national opinion is as vectors—forces with a certain magnitude and a certain direction. Vectors are not necessarily simple; most result from the combination of smaller vectors of different magnitudes and varying directions. Looking at the various elements can be as revealing as examining the composite.

Whatever the "averages" might suggest, groups within the populace take distinct and differing stands on many of the issues coming before them. Blacks are more liberal on many social issues than whites, for example, and old people more conservative than young. Jews are further to the left than Protestants. Leaving race and religion out of the picture, there are differences between college graduates and those with only high-school diplomas. These differences in the breakdown of opinion vary in importance. However, some of them persist, appear across a wide range of questions, and have roots deep in the American social structure. "Class conflict" is of central importance, even in the United States where it has been relatively

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muted. And a basic change has occurred in this area since the New Deal days.

During the Roosevelt years and indeed up through the 1950s, the central class conflict in this country was between the *middle class* and the *working class*. This confrontation was always somewhat fuzzy and only partly reflected in Democratic or Republican party affiliation, but it was tangible nonetheless.

On a broad array of economic and social questions, groups identified by one or more facets of middle-to-upper-middle-class status (higher incomes, jobs as managers or professionals, a college education) differed sharply, in a generally conservative direction, from the working class—that is, from blue-collar workers, those with lower incomes, or those with only a grade-school or high-school education. The college-trained segment of the population, for example, gave consistently less backing to New Deal social programs than did people with high-school and grade-school educations. High-school graduates provided more support for government ownership of utilities (telephones and electric power), for extension of the vote to 18-year-olds, and even for the idea that husbands should pay their wives a weekly wage for housework.

Today, much of this has changed. The primary class conflict is no longer between the lower income group and the middle class but rather pits a *lower-middle* against an *upper-middle class*. What we have is a “new conservatism” and a “new liberalism.” And in a reversal of the New Deal relationship, it is now the higher status group that is the more “liberal.”

### Today's Class Lines

Neither of these groups, I should add, is “conservative” in the Ronald Reagan sense. Both take the liberal “political economy” of the New Deal for granted, and they are not prepared to dismantle it. But still, these two new groupings occupy markedly different places in contemporary society.

Current differences between higher- and lower-status groups are sharpest on the broad array of social, cultural, and “lifestyle” questions. Thus, 70 percent of Americans with five or more years of college training believe that a pregnant woman should be able to get a legal abortion simply because she wants to; only 45 percent of high-school graduates and 33 percent of those without secondary school diplomas agree. Adultery is described as “always wrong” by less than half of those with five or more years of college, but 81 percent of persons with less than a high-school education express disapproval.

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This contrast goes further. In the New Deal era, higher status groups were more resistant to public spending. No longer. The National Opinion Research Center has examined public attitudes on a range of federal spending programs: improving the condition of black Americans, welfare, space exploration, environmental matters, health, urban problems, education, crime, drug addiction, defense, and the like. For almost all of these, college-educated Americans favor increased public spending to a greater degree than do their less-educated counterparts. The less well educated showed more support for greater outlays in only three areas: to halt the rising crime rate; to fight drug addiction; and to provide for national defense. In all other indexes, the class and opinion patterns have been turned on their heads.

### The Educational Divide

Interestingly enough, traditional "bourgeois" values today find greater support from among the working class than from the ranks of college-educated professionals, even as the country has become more liberal. The high-school-trained segments of the population place more stress than do the college-trained on the importance of hard work, on "duty before pleasure," on frugality and the avoidance of debt, and on the material attainments that the bourgeoisie has historically associated with "success."

Conversely, the college-trained, when compared to the high-school- and grade-school-educated, urge less emphasis on money, more on "self-fulfillment," less on making "sacrifices" for one's children.

Is it valid to look at this class divide primarily in terms of education? In fact, one often reaches the same conclusions if one looks at occupation or income. Yet, in the 1970s, education, not income or occupation, is the key variable. Differences separating the basic occupational categories (professional, managerial, white-collar, blue-collar) are more modest than those that education alone produces. More striking, when education is held constant—that is, when only people with college degrees or only the high-school-educated are considered—the occupation-related differences *disappear completely*: professionals, managers, office and retail clerks, and blue-collar people who are college graduates show virtually identical distributions on the entire range of issues we have been discussing. By way of contrast, if occupation is held constant, education-linked variations are sharp within each occupational category.

**OPINION DIFFERENCES BY EDUCATION****VIEWS ON DOMESTIC ISSUES**

U.S. SPENDING TOO LITTLE ON:	less than high school	high school grad	some college	college grad	post grad
Space exploration	4%	7%	15%	16%	15%
Improving/protecting environment	51	59	66	69	67
Improving/protecting nation's health	61	63	66	65	66
Solving problems of big cities	49	52	57	57	64
Improving nation's education system	46	51	58	55	60
Halting rising crime rate	69	73	67	67	64
Dealing with drug addiction	67	64	62	56	54
<b>SPENDING TOO MUCH ON:</b>					
Improving condition of blacks	27	27	24	19	18
Welfare	47	60	57	54	50

**VIEWS ON FOREIGN POLICY AND DEFENSE**

U.S. should cut back defense spending	33%	28%	39%	44%	60%
Even if it means U.S. strength falls behind U.S.S.R.	18	19	38	61	58
Even if it means unemployment	32	36	59	75	66
Communism not worst kind of government	40	46	60	69	74
Not a threat to U.S. if . . . became communist					
Western European countries	15	18	25	34	42
Japan	18	21	28	46	42
African countries	31	37	45	57	61
Latin American countries	16	19	24	39	48
CIA should not work inside foreign countries to strengthen pro-American elements	35	30	40	46	61

Sources: NORC, General Social Surveys, 1972-77; Harris/Chicago Council on Foreign Relations, 1974.

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In sum, then, the *primary* class conflict is no longer between the lower and middle classes, defined by differences in the sources and amounts of income, but between the lower-middle and upper-middle classes, classes that are shaped largely by education.

### A New Intelligentsia

What lies behind these new class lines?

Two key developments set the stage. First, the upper-middle class in the United States has shed much of its identification with the business world. Increasingly, large segments of the broad, new upper-middle class think of themselves primarily as professionals—business administrators, engineers, accountants, lawyers, and so on—all responding to intellectual values rather than the profit orientation traditionally associated with business. Along with their counterparts in the growing public sector, these upper-middle-class professionals have become the core of a new “intelligentsia.”\*

Louis Harris has found confirmation of one aspect of this argument. Noting that, in the contemporary United States, “at the key executive level, more people [are] employed in professional than in line-executive capacities,” he puts special emphasis on the fact that “the one quality that divided most professionals from line executives in business organizations was that the professionals felt much more beholden to their outside discipline—whether it be systems engineering, teaching, scientific research, or other professional ties—than to the particular company or institution they worked for.”

The critical factor in creating the intelligentsia has been the extraordinary expansion of higher education in the post-World War II period. The number of students enrolled in degree-credit programs in the country’s colleges and universities—now about 10 million—is seven times greater than what it was on the eve of World War II. College students now make up nearly 5 percent of the total population of the country, compared to just over 1 percent in 1940. Some 16 percent of all Americans 21 years or older—about 21 million people—have completed at least four years of formal college training.

As the American upper-middle class has been transformed into an intelligentsia, there has been a second and equally important development: A new bourgeoisie has appeared on the

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\*I use “intelligentsia” to include not only intellectuals—people involved in the creation of new ideas, new knowledge, new cultural forms—but also that far larger community whose training gives them some facility in handling abstract ideas or whose work requires them to manipulate ideas rather than things.

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scene in an interesting kind of replacement phenomenon. The working class of the depression decade included people who were, disproportionately, “have-nots,” and it formed opinions accordingly. Today, skilled manual workers and those in related blue-collar occupations have moved decisively into a “have,” rather than a “have-not,” economic position. In a wonderfully American semantic contradiction, a large segment of the *working class* has become *middle class*, with cherished values and substantial economic interests to protect.

A complex set of precipitating events is involved here. The United States saw a tremendous spread of economic well-being in the first three decades after World War II, when the median income for all American families jumped from \$5,665 to \$11,120 (in 1972 dollars). Individual families, even with inflation, gained more purchasing power in this brief span than in all preceding periods of American history combined. A lot of people have moved a long way.

Public opinion possesses a certain inertia; it is slow to get started in a particular direction, and once on the move it is hard to stop. The trends I have identified—toward greater liberalism *in general*, with the better educated Americans at the forefront—are inertial trends. They will not be deflected easily. What do they tell us about our society?

I believe they reflect the development in the United States of what Daniel Bell has called a *postindustrial society* marked by affluence, the critical importance of the “knowledge” and communications industries, and the rise of new kinds of jobs (such as “services”), lifestyles, social classes, and centers of power.

What I have called the intelligentsia—its outer boundaries would be the tens of millions of Americans who have been to college—is in many respects the advance guard of this new society. The content of most serious magazines, newspapers, and network television news broadcasts is shaped by them. The result is a kind of two-step transfer of ideas and information from the intelligentsia via the media to the nation at large.

Opinion polls bear this notion out, and I suspect they will for many years to come.



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## BACKGROUND BOOKS

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### PUBLIC OPINION

Fifty-seven years ago, Walter Lippmann wrote that the pictures inside the heads of human beings, "the pictures of themselves, of others, of their needs, purposes, and relationships" are their "public opinions." Those pictures "which are acted upon by groups of people, or by individuals also acting in the name of groups, are Public Opinion with capital letters."

These definitions, from **Public Opinion** (Harcourt, 1922, cloth; Free Press, 1965, paper) are as precise as any we are likely to get. Writing long before the advent of TV news, Lippmann emphasizes the barriers to informed opinion, notably the "comparatively meager time available [to citizens] in each day for paying attention to public affairs" and "the distortion arising because events have to be compressed into very short messages." His conclusion, that "public opinions" must be organized not *by* the press but *for* the press "if they are to be sound," is one on which political scientists, sociologists, and for-hire pollsters have been attempting to act ever since.

Much of the best work on the art of determining public opinion and the factors that influence it has been published only in obscure specialized journals. Some articles are available in anthologies, including Bernard Berelson and Morris Janowitz's **Reader in Public Opinion and Communication** (Free Press, 1950; 2nd ed., 1966). This widely used compendium opens with a brief history of the concept of *vox populi* from Roman times (Machiavelli in *The Prince* observed that "Not without reason is the voice of the people compared to the voice of God").

Fairly heavy going for the general reader but still the most important intellectual assessment of its subject is V. O. Key's **Public Opinion and American Democracy** (Knopf, 1961). Key's recognition that interest in assessing public opinion was diminishing among political scientists, while gaining ground with sociologists, led him to analyze two decades' worth of copious findings in an attempt to place the new knowledge produced by surveys and polls in a political context. He asserts that all the research of the 1940s and '50s seemed to confirm the existence of a category of well-educated "influentials" in American society. This group is to blame, he writes, "if a democracy tends toward indecision, decay, and disaster"; the masses "do not corrupt themselves."

Professional pollsters have never been shy about publishing. George Gallup and Saul Forbes Rae in **The Pulse of Democracy** (Simon & Schuster, 1940; Greenwood reprint, 1968) contrast the *Literary Digest's* disastrous "gigantic sampling" of voter intentions in the 1936 presidential election with the predictive accuracy of the "scientific" state-by-state polling done by Gallup's American Institute of Public Opinion (average deviation 6.1 percent), the Crossley organization for the Hearst newspapers (average deviation 5.8 percent), and *Fortune* magazine's "amazingly accurate" popular vote totals.

Charles W. Roll, Jr. and Albert H. Cantril, co-authors of **Polls: Their Use and Misuse in Politics** (Basic Books, 1972), warn of the dangers inherent in the use of surveys by politi-



cians who pander to the people's prejudices and exploit their many legitimate fears. But they argue that national leaders must accurately gauge public opinion before making decisions if there is to be any chance of successful implementation.

Cantril worked in Lyndon Johnson's White House. His father, psychologist Hadley Cantril, established the Office of Public Opinion Research at Princeton in 1940. One of the elder Cantril's many books, **The Human Dimension: Experiences in Policy Research** (Rutgers, 1967), is an engaging account of his own and others' polling efforts for the Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower, and Kennedy administrations. He includes Lloyd Free's early study of the Cuban people's support for Fidel Castro, ignored at the time; it showed 86 percent of the urban population expressing enthusiasm for his regime. After the ill-fated Bay of Pigs invasion attempt in 1961, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., then Special Assistant to JFK, wrote to Free that he only wished "a copy had come to my attention earlier."

In **War, Presidents, and Public Opinion** (Wiley, 1973, cloth & paper), John E. Mueller finds that the Korean and Vietnam wars each inspired support and opposition from the same sectors of the population with one "striking exception"—the "Jewish subgroup" that solidly supported the Korean War but opposed the war in Vietnam.

The possible effect of TV campaign "horse-race" coverage is a matter of argument in the United States today.

In **Polls, Television, and the New Politics** (Chandler, 1970, paper only), Harold A. Mendelsohn and Irving Crespi look carefully at the function of polls in presidential elections 1952–68. They dispute the theory that voters tend to favor candidates who look like winners on Election Day.

Leo Bogart, in **Silent Politics: Polls and the Awareness of Public Opinion** (Wiley, 1972, cloth; Orbis, 1977, paper), finds much disturbing in both the techniques employed by opinion research specialists (e.g., weighted questions) and the uses to which data is put. Every major election in recent years has brought forth inquests on the political effects of polls, he reports, and even minor politicians have called for direct restrictions on the pollsters. In 1968, the mayor of Rockledge, Fla., a Romney supporter, incensed that his candidate had withdrawn from the New Hampshire primary on the basis of a poll "before the people had a chance to vote for or against him," persuaded his city council to draft an ordinance forbidding national pollsters to quiz Rockledge residents about their politics.

On the plus side, Bogart concludes that the best opinion research forces pundits and politicians to recognize that the opinions of the apathetic and disengaged cannot be equated with those of an informed citizenry aware of its stake in the issues and its own accountability. This, he writes, "makes polls a factor in the political process rather than merely an account of it."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: *Many titles were recommended by Wilson Center Fellows Gladys and Kurt Lang, who are studying media coverage and public opinion during Watergate.*