Coming to Grips with V.O. Key's Concept of Latent Opinion*

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When the late V.O. Key, Jr. wrote that "to speak with precision about public opinion is a task not unlike coming to grips with the Holy Ghost" (p. 8), he gave the behavioral revolution then gaining force just the excuse it needed to ignore his important concept of “latent opinion.” This paper attempts a revival of that concept.

Key (1961) defined public opinion as "those opinions held by private persons which governments find it prudent to heed." He went on to introduce the concept of "latent opinion," which "in the practice of politics and government ... is really about the only type of opinion that generates much anxiety" (p. 262). Key offered several understandings of the "singularly slippery" idea of latent opinion, but all reduced to essentially this: Latent opinion is opinion that might exist at some point in the future in response to the decision-makers actions and may therefore result in political damage or even the defeat at the polls. This is why office holders care about it and why Key made it central to his analysis.

Key pointed out that public opinion as measured in polls might often be a poor indicator of latent opinion. "Responses to survey questions," he explained, give no clue "as to the convertibility of opinion into votes." Thus

> if a legislator is to worry about the attitude of his district, what he needs really to worry about is, not whether his performance pleases the constituency at the moment, but what the response of his constituency will be in the next campaign when persons aggrieved by his position attack his record. The constituency, thus, acquires a sanction largely through those political instruments that assure a challenge of the record. In the large, that function is an activity of the minority party. (p. 499)

If the private opinions that governments are most prudent to heed — and presumably do heed — are opinions that opponents might stir up at the next election, it is little wonder that Key compared the study of public opinion to coming to grips with the Holy Ghost. If anything, he underestimated the problem.

Writing at the same time, Philip Converse faced the same challenge as Key, noting, for example, that mass belief systems had never surrendered easily to empirical study (Converse,

1964). But Converse didn't go on to talk about the Holy Ghost. He and his Michigan collaborators (Campbell et al., 1960) built models to show that it was, in fact, possible to speak with precision about public opinion. Nor can work in the Michigan tradition be faulted for failing to situate public opinion in the political process. *Elections and the Political Order*, published in the mid-1960s, still stands as a model of politically relevant political behavior research (Campbell et al, 1966). Also, although it is sometimes forgotten, Converse's seminal work on belief systems took as its focal task the interpretation of electoral mandates, whether in 19th century America, Nazi Germany, or the U.S. election of 1956. Thus, his path-breaking arguments that most voters are not ideological, and that they often have no attitudes at all, were in service of a larger point concerning the kinds of inferences that may and may not be legitimately drawn from expressions of public opinion. One finds comparably political concerns in all of Converse's major work.

The modeling tradition that the Michigan scholars helped to inaugurate has carried the day in public opinion research, but 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-square.[1] 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 non-attitudes. And finally, it highlights how politicians try both to anticipate and to shape – to follow and to lead – public attitudes. 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.

For these reasons, then, this paper attempts a revival of scholarly interest in latent opinion, a neglected element in the tradition of V. O. Key. The paper has five main sections. The first

[1] These sorts of shortcomings are at least as evident in my *Nature and Origins of Mass Opinion*, with its relentlessly top-down view of politics, as in most other behavioral research.

explicates the concept of latent opinion and gives some examples. The second describes what I claim is a common type of latent opinion – namely, a propensity on the part of the public to resist painful tradeoffs and to punish politicians who force it to choose. Even when the public seems to accept a tradeoff, it may suddenly reverse course, especially when urged to do so by the opposition at election time. The latent opinion that exists on many issues is, therefore, "to have one's cake and eat it too." Though sometimes difficult to observe in polls at the moment politicians must chose policies, it may later spring to life at the beckoning of skilled opponents.

The third part of the paper attempts to specify some conditions that affect when politicians are controlled by public opinion as expressed in current polls and when they will disregard current public opinion in order to be responsive to latent opinion. For purposes of this section, latent opinion may involve the public wanting to have its cake and eat it too, or it may involve some other latent response propensity of the public. The key proposition is that when a politician believes that he knows better than the public what means will lead to desired ends, he will ignore the polls and follow his own beliefs. President Clinton's executive authorization of $40 billion in loan supports to Mexico in his first term is a perfect example: although the policy was massively unpopular at the time he approved it, Clinton believed – or acted as if he believed -- that the ripple effects of a crippled Mexican economy on the U.S. economy, which the loan was designed to prevent, would be more politically damaging to him at reelection time than lingering resentment of the loan "bailout." Several arguably similar cases in which Clinton ignored current opinion in order to play to latent opinion are examined.

The fourth part of the paper returns to the notion of inconsistent opinion as embodied in the latent tendency to want to have one's cake and eat it too. In an analogy to market capitalism, in which consumers inconsistently want both the highest quality goods at the lowest possible cost, the argument is that such inconsistency may often serve the public's interest. A final section argues for the continuing relevance of latent opinion in research and teaching on public opinion.

The bulk of the paper consists of anecdotal evidence that publics and politicians behave in accordance with these propositions. There is no systematic testing. The aim is merely to

explicate Key's concept, show some new ways in which it can be used, and thereby call attention to what seems to me an important avenue for future systematic research.

I. The Concept of Latent Opinion

Although Key drew a parallel between public opinion and the Holy Ghost, he was no mystic when it came to explaining public opinion. Nor did be believe that the politicians who heeded latent opinion – an entity that, by definition, was not directly observable – were responding to figments of their own imaginations. His position, rather, was that the public has real propensities to respond to stimuli in particular ways, that savvy politicians learned or could at least sense many of these propensities, and that political scientists are, to a limited extent, able to generalize about them.

> The citizen is equipped with ingrained sets of values, criteria for judgment, attitudes, preferences, dislikes – pictures in his head – that come into play when a relevant action, event, or proposal arises. To know how the public will respond to a contemplated course of action, those in positions of leadership and authority need only to relate that action to their estimate of the pictures in people's heads – and adjust their strategy accordingly. (p. 264)

Some of the public's propensities were, as Key said, "more or less Pavlovian" or "mechanical" in character (p. 271); others "depend on the broad kinds of values and expectations held by people" (p. 274); and some involve a willingness to take cues from "that vaguely defined category we call the 'political elite'" (p. 286). Some forms of latent opinion were so basic (e.g., a propensity to react defensively to threat) that Key doubted whether anything was gained by applying his term to them; others involved novel events for which people lacked "the comforting guidance of grooves in the brain," thus rendering their responses "utterly unpredictable" (p. 267).

Notwithstanding Key's hesitations, his pivotal decision to define public opinion in terms of its response propensities rather than fully formed opinions, on the grounds that politicians' estimates of these propensities are what drive politics, presents no deep theoretical difficulties.

The difficulties are on the practical side – having sufficient data and wit to reliably detect the response patterns that exist.

One well-known and important form of latent opinion is the reliable propensity of voters to punish presidents at election time for good or bad economic performance. Since the 19th century, incumbent politicians have known about this response propensity and exerted themselves to make sure performance was good (Tufte, 1978). Although my use of the concept of latent opinion to characterize this phenomenon sheds no new light on it, the reference does reinforce the point that there is no in principle difficulty in studying latent opinion. It is simply a matter of identifying and measuring particular response regularities.

The so-called "rally round the flag" effect in foreign policy crises is another notable case of latent opinion. Following the imaginative work of Mueller (1973) and armed with an abundance of surveys measuring presidential popularity, scholars now recognize a reliable tendency for the public to support the President in times of crisis (Oneal, Lian and Joyner, 1996; Baum, 2000). Whether this tendency is rooted in a "Pavlovian" instinct, or, as Brody (1993) has suggested, an inclination to follow elite cues in crisis, it seems another straightforward example of a propensity that Key would call latent opinion.

"Rally events" usually refer to upward spikes in presidential job approval, but the propensity of the public to support the policy initiatives of presidents in foreign policy crises may be even greater. In 1988, a national poll found that only 18 percent of the public favored sending U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia if necessary to defend it from Iran. But two years later, when the threat to Saudi Arabia was from Iraq rather than Iran, 75 to 80 percent of the public supported President Bush's decision to send U.S. troops virtually as soon as he announced it (Mueller, 1994). Most rally effects are considerably smaller than this 60-percentage point surge, but this is probably because few rallies develop from such a low base of initial public support.

As I understand Key's concept, the latent opinion in this example is not the high level of support that Bush enjoyed after announcing his policy. It is the public's reliable propensity to provide such support – a propensity that was not immediately observable in polls at the time Bush

acted but might have been inferred from the public's responses to past crises. Thus, one would say that latent public opinion toward presidential policy in foreign policy crises is to support it, at least during the initial phase of the crisis. A president's task in such crises is then to activate this latent opinion. More generally, the task of ambitious politicians is to activate latent opinions that are helpful to their cause and steer clear of latent opinions that may damage them politically.

The argument for Key's approach is, as I have indicated, that it fruitfully focuses research attention on the particular form of public opinion that often really drives politics. Thus, it is important to note that, in the case of rally effects, politicians are well aware that rally effects occur and act in conscious anticipation of them. For example, at the time that the U.S. attacked Iraq in early 1991, polls indicated that only about half of the public supported this policy. When, in the course of another study, I asked a high Pentagon official whether this lack of support was a problem, he insisted it was not. "We felt the country basically supported the military effort," he said, "and that as soon as the fighting started, there would be a surge of increased support." Then, if the war could be won quickly enough, public support would never become an issue (Zaller, 1995, p. 258).

But if, as these example make clear, it is easy to point to important, well-established forms of latent opinion, it does not follow that all forms are so easy to identify, either for politicians or for academics. Yet, as I seek to show in the next two sections, other important forms of latent opinion can be identified and described in general terms.

II. Latent Opinion and Presidential Decision-Making on Vietnam

Many political issues are endogenous. That is, they arise from the strategic decisions of politicians who either do or do not want to face the issue, based on their estimates of latent opinion. If politicians behave with sufficient shrewdness, the latent opinions that become actual opinions will be a very biased sample – biased toward issues that make decision-makers look good and away from issues that would have made them look bad. This may be true even in the domain of foreign policy, where crises tend to rise exogenously. For even here, presidents may respond to some international provocations and not others. For example, when the North

Vietnamese attacked U.S. naval forces in the Gulf of Tonkin shortly before the 1964 election, President Johnson responded vigorously. But when the North Koreans not only attacked but seized the U.S.S. Pueblo in 1968, Johnson's response was low-key and unassertive. This sort of endogeneity bias in the potential issues that become actual issues greatly complicates the study of latent opinion.

In this section, I examine presidential decision-making in the early stages of the Vietnam War. The section has three aims: 1) to show that Presidents Kennedy and Johnson followed political strategies based on a particular reading of what public opinion toward future policies would be – that is, a particular reading of latent opinion; 2) to lay the groundwork for a claim that latent opinion often takes a particular general form that it had in the Vietnam case; and 3) to deal, as best I can, with the endogeneity issue just raised.

Following the adage that "hard cases make bad law," one should perhaps avoid using the Vietnam war as a case study. Not only did it produce what was arguably the greatest policy disaster of the post-World War II era.[2] It also presented an unusually severe policy tradeoff: Most Americans wanted to contain the expansion of Communism, but few wanted to fight a land war in the jungles of Vietnam to achieve that goal.

Yet, since part of the purpose of this paper is to examine the public's latent response to policy tradeoffs, the Vietnam war makes an excellent case to study. The fact that it is an unusually important case merely means that, for my purposes, it is an easy case to get information about.

In his political biography of President John Kennedy, Richard Reeves, a journalist, provides abundant evidence concerning Kennedy's political calculus on Vietnam. Reeves never mentions latent opinion, but he depicts a president in constant dread of what his Republican opponent in the next election might say about him. With the memory of the McCarthyist 1950s still fresh, many of Kennedy's fears centered on U.S. involvement in Vietnam, a conflict he felt he could neither win nor afford to lose:

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[2] The case to the contrary would be that, although costly to the U.S., the Vietnam War was useful in signaling to American resolve, thereby keeping up the pressure that led to the demise of the Soviet Union.

> [Kennedy] told [Walt] Rostow he did not need stacks of memos to understand political consequences, that was his business. American withdrawal [from Vietnam] would destroy him and the Democratic party in a replay of "Who Lost China?" debate in the early 1950s.... (p. 261)
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> That evening over a drink, Kennedy brought up Vietnam again with Charlie Bartlett: "We don't have a prayer of staying in Vietnam. Those people hate us. They are going to throw our asses out of there at almost any point. But I can't give up a piece of territory like that to the Communists and then get the American people to re-elect me..." (p. 484)[3]
>
> Politically, he could not afford to look weak militarily. Whatever he truly thought ... about the commitment of Americans on the ground in Asia, he was not ready, as he had told CBS only a month before, to be accused of losing Vietnam to the Communists, as other American politicians had only ten years before been accused of losing China to the Communists, and had been destroyed. (p. 604)

But although Kennedy feared the public would punish him for "losing Vietnam," he also feared electoral retribution if he undertook a military effort to save it. As he told a confidant in another context, "we all know how quickly everybody's courage goes when the blood starts to flow." (p. 416). (Political scientist John Mueller [1973] would soon provide the exact mathematical form for the rate at which courage declines as a function of casualties – another way in which Mueller studied latent opinion without using this term.)

From Kennedy's reading of public opinion, the dilemma he faced was as follows: Any attempt to "save" Vietnam would encounter unacceptable domestic political consequences

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[3] Marc Trachtenberg offers an insightful interpretation of this remark by Bartlett, a journalistic friend of the president. Perhaps, Trachtenberg suggests, Kennedy was not so much confiding in Bartlett as using him as to get out a message that would make it easier for Kennedy to eventually withdraw. If, after all, other elites came to believe that Kennedy believed that the only reason to stay in Vietnam was to avoid electoral embarrassment, it would make it harder for Kennedy to escalate and easier to withdraw. Trachtenberg cites another case in which Kennedy told journalist Arthur Krock in late 1961 that the "domino theory" would make no sense in Southeast Asia after the People's Republic of China got nuclear weapons. Again, Kennedy might have intended his remark to create pressure that would make it harder to escalate in Vietnam and easier to withdraw. Even if Trachtenberg's interpretation of Bartlett's remark is correct, it does not undermine my argument. It simply shows Kennedy trying to escape the pressure created by the public's wish for a free lunch by creating a sympathetic understanding of his dilemma among other elites.

because the public was not willing to support sustained use of military force. Yet, at the same time, if my analysis is correct, the public would not tolerate the loss of Vietnam either. The public, in other words, wanted to have its cake and eat it too – to contain communism without paying the cost for containing it. Or, in a different metaphor, it wanted a free lunch.

After Kennedy's death, President Johnson faced the same predicament in Vietnam and, as secretly recorded tape recordings make clear, he parsed it exactly as Kennedy had. "We haven't got any mothers that will go with us in a war…" he told the Joint Chiefs of Staff (Bechloss, p. 267). To his friend Richard Russell, he confided, "I don't think the people of this country know much about Vietnam and I think they care a hell of a lot less…" (p. 365).

Yet at the same time, Johnson felt political pressure to maintain the U.S. position. As he put it, "I'm confronted. I don't believe the American people ever want me to run [from Vietnam]. If I lose it, I think they'll say I've lost. I've pulled in." 401 "They'd impeach a president though that would run out, wouldn't they?" he asked Russell. (369).

Johnson was particularly worried about Barry Goldwater, the 1964 Republican presidential nominee who criticized Democrats for being soft on defense and seemed to thrive politically by doing so. As one of Johnson's adviser's told him, "You're going to be running against a man who's a wild man on this subject. Any lack of firmness he'll make up." Hence, in any crisis, it was imperative, as the advisor said, for the U.S. to act tough: "You've got to do what's right for the country …. But whatever you can do to say, when they shoot at us from the back, we're not soft … we're going to protect ourselves, we'll protect our boys … I think it's all to the good" (p. 495). Even after the 1964 election, Johnson continued to worry about attacks from the right. As he told George Ball in 1965, "George, don't pay any attention to what those little shits on the campuses do. The great beast is the reactionary elements in the country. Those are the people that we have to fear."[4]

[4] Cited in Robert L. Jervis, H-Diplo Roundtable Discussion, posted February 1, 2000.

Yet, although Johnson felt pressure from Republicans to be tough in Vietnam, he felt that the opposition would criticize him for that too. When, at one point, Robert McNamara urged Johnson to "educate" the public about the need for a sustained effort in Vietnam, Johnson responded that "I think if you start doing [that], they're going to be hollering 'You're a warmonger' …I think that's the horn Republicans want to get us on" (388). Even worse would be if American soldiers began to suffer casualties. "You get a few [soldiers] … killed … The Republicans are going to make a political issue out of it, every one of them, even [anti-communist Republican leader Everett] Dirksen …(365).".

Nor were Republicans the only opposition group Johnson had to fear. Under the new leadership of Robert Kennedy, the Kennedy wing of the Democratic party had, to that point, impeccable anti-Communist credentials and was prepared to assert them to retake the presidency. "Members of the Kennedy team," as Gelb (1979: 222) has suggested, "would be in the front line in charging Johnson with being soft" – but also, as Bobby would show in 1968, the front line in charging Johnson with waging an immoral war.[5]

There was, finally, another opposition group poised to criticize Johnson, the press. As Gelb observes:

> Past experience with domestic reaction to anything that resembled a gain for communism showed what could be expected. Congress and the press would not talk about anything else. The "loss" would be the number one news story for months at the least. The administration would have to try to show that the loss was not a defeat… consum[ing] invaluable time and energy in its own defense. That was the key. The president would be on the defensive, making him look vulnerable to attack on other issues as well. (p. 223)

Johnson, then, read public opinion as wanting to save Vietnam without paying a price to do so, and he saw other elites as eager to play to that view, lambasting him for either losing Vietnam or incurring costs to prevent that outcome. The architecture of Johnson's Vietnam policy

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[5] Gelb cites journalist Tom Wicker as the authority for this view.

reflected this balance of pressures: Public assurance that the U.S. would prevail in Vietnam, combined with refusal to authorize the level of military force requested by the Pentagon, or even to admit the level of military force that he had approved. Other factors obviously played a role in Vietnam policy, but the congruence between a public opinion passively committed to a free lunch and policies that aimed at providing one should not be overlooked as a primary determinant of U.S. policy in that conflict.

What makes Vietnam a case of responding to latent opinion rather than actual opinion as measured in polls is that, in the critical period prior to the introduction of combat troops, opinion polls, when they existed at all, were of little relevance. Probably because Kennedy and Johnson feared that anti-Communist hotheads would dominate an open discussion of Vietnam -- another bow to latent public opinion -- neither sought debate of the issue. Attempts along these lines would, as Johnson put it, only lead to charges that he was a warmonger. And in the absence of discussion, few Americans had opinions that were worth taking seriously. As Johnson complained to one of his advisors in May, 1964,

> Did you see the poll this morning? Sixty-five percent of 'em don't know anything about it [Vietnam] and of those that do, the majority think we're mishandling it. But they don't know what to do. That's Gallup. It's damn easy to get in a war but it's gonna be awfully hard to ever extricate yourself if you get in.

Public opinion was, of course, even less crystallized in Kennedy's term. Thus, both Kennedy and Johnson were forced to navigate by their readings of latent opinion.

The political pressures present in this situation– an ambivalent public that would be encouraged by opposition elites to insist on having it both ways – arise with some frequency in American politics and constitute an important general instance of Key's concept of latent opinion. But before making that argument, I first I need to clarify some issues relating to the Vietnam case.

As I noted earlier, Key's concept of latent opinion is not about politicians' *perception* of public opinion. It is about *actual propensities* of public opinion that politicians are prudent to heed. This, in turn, brings us to the endogeneity problem also mentioned earlier: If politicians are successful in heeding the propensities of public opinion, the propensities, even if real, never become manifest. The only thing that can be directly observed is politicians acting to head off what they perceive to be real propensities.

How, then, can we confirm that the propensities are real? In the case of Vietnam, in particular, how can we know that public would punish any politician who "lost Vietnam?" Might not Americans have applauded a unilateral withdrawal from Vietnam in 1965 and rewarded Johnson with a triumphal re-election in 1968? Perhaps Kennedy and Johnson both made mistaken readings of public opinion.

Polls from the period in which Kennedy and Johnson made fateful decisions concerning Vietnam do show majorities against permitting a communist takeover anywhere in the world, including Vietnam. But such polls offer little help because what we need to know is how the public *would have responded* if Kennedy or Johnson had tried to lead the country out of Vietnam. One might contend that either president could have done so because, as other evidence shows, presidents are often effective in leading or "educating" public opinion on foreign policy (Gamson and Modigliani, 1966; Mueller, 1973). Yet this evidence is also suspect, since cases in which presidents attempt to educate public opinion are a selected sample – cases, that is, in which presidents have believed, quite possibly with reason, that they could effectively lead mass opinion. [6] In cases in which leadership appears hopeless, as it may have been in the case of Vietnam, no leadership is attempted.

We are left, then, with no untainted evidence on whether Kennedy and Johnson's readings of future public opinion were accurate. In the normal absence of experimental evidence, we are unlikely ever to get such evidence either for this or other similar ones.

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[6] For a formal statement and an empirical illustration of this problem, see Schultz, 2001.

Yet attention to latent opinion is not entirely without recompense. If nothing else, it forces recognition that realistic analysis of the relationship between public opinion and policy-making must examine not only hard poll data, but more amorphous evidence concerning latent opinion. And that evidence, though not untainted, does have value. For there is enough of it to make clear that Kennedy and Johnson faced *actual dangers* if either had decided to pull out of Vietnam. We know this because we can, as latter-day analysts, look at the same evidence they did and recognize in it the same dangers: A replay of the 1950s debate over "who lost China," charges that Democratic presidents were incompetent stewards of Cold War foreign policy and "soft" on communism, and so forth. Kennedy or Johnson might have been able to effectively manage these charges, which were already being hurled at them by Goldwater, but the dangers they posed are, *in light of events of the previous period*, hard to doubt. This is because, quite apart from the Vietnam case, the evidence from the first years of the Cold War indicates that the public had *some propensity* to punish presidents who allowed gains to Communism, whether it would have done so in the particular case of Vietnam or not. If the evidence of this latent opinion is not stronger, it is probably because, even in the late 1940s and 1950s, policy-makers exerted themselves to heed it. Yet, we can also see that, even so, Truman's popularity plummeted amid his attempts to save Korea from communism, thus suggesting little public tolerance for anti-Communist wars that involve heavy loss of American lives.

Scholars have devoted much energy to the counterfactual question of whether Kennedy or Johnson could have engineered a politically safe withdrawal from Vietnam. They make an especially plausible case that, in the political context of early 1965, other politicians and the media would have provided enough cover to induce the public to accept a well-crafted presidential decision to withdraw.[7] Even opposition politicians might mostly have gone quietly along, since arguing against peace would have made salient the cost of not withdrawing.

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[7] See review essay by John Garofano (2002); Logevall (1999, Chapter 12). Given, however, the extent of U.S. military commitment, it should be pointed out that these scholars are essentially ignoring Fearon's (1994) incisive argument about audience costs, as if 15 years of U.S. involvement in Vietnam had little importance.

However, a claim that a president could have managed a politically safe withdrawal cannot stop here. How would international events have played out over the next few years? How would political opponents have responded at the next election? And how would voters have responded at that time? It might have been safer to attack a withdrawal decision from a distance of several months or years, when the danger of actually sending troops had passed, and harder to defend at that time, when arguments about cost might have seemed to voters like excuses for inaction.[8] One can, to be sure, imagine a counterfactual in which Johnson led the country out of Vietnam, Cold War tensions abated, and racial disturbances in the cities became the big issue of the 1968 election. However, one can equally well imagine a 1968 campaign in which alleged defeat in Vietnam, racial disturbances in the cities, and seizure of the U.S.S. Pueblo by North Korea in early 1968 were rolled into one grand theme of national humiliation. Presidential campaigns often roll many issues into one -- of which Kennedy's 1960 promise to "get the country moving again" is a good example -- and it is difficult to anticipate what combinations will arise. It may be precisely this uncertainty that makes presidents loathe to concede anything to the opposition that can be retrospectively interpreted as failure and packaged with other apparent failures, as withdrawal from Vietnam could easily have been.

Thin as it is, then, I believe the evidence is sufficient to show that, as regards the Cold War, the public wanted to contain communism without having to fight continual wars to do so and that Kennedy and Johnson were not simply imagining that this propensity existed. It thus tends to uphold the key point in this analysis: That the principal contours of American policy on Vietnam -- doing enough to avoid losing without making a whole-hearted commitment to winning -- are interpretable as a response to the public's latent preference to avoid painful tradeoffs.

To learn more about latent opinion, we shall need to examine a greater number of cases and to generate something closer to testable predictions. I undertake to do both in Section III.

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[8] The notion that opposition politicians may bide their time to see how events play out is developed in Zaller (1995).

Summary

The Vietnam case shows both the importance of taking latent public opinion into account in the study of democratic politics and the pitfalls in trying to do so. It also reveals three specific factors that may arise with some frequency in American politics: First, a mass public that is inclined to avoid tradeoffs between competing values; second, opposition politicians eager to encourage the public in this propensity; and third, government decision-makers more interested in future opinion than present opinion. How often these factors arise, whether in foreign policy crises or elsewhere, is obviously uncertain.

III. When Politicians Should Ignore the Polls

When public opinion is inconsistent or poorly crystallized, as in the case examined in the previous section, presidents may feel relatively free to ignore the polls. Yet there are cases in which savvy politicians ignore one-sided expressions of apparently firm and clear opinion. One involved the so-called "Mexican bailout" in early 1995. The problem arose after Mexican politicians maintained the value of their national currency at an artificially high level for electoral purposes. This device worked to prop up the Mexican economy for some months, but eventually led to a spectacular crash of the peso on the international currency markets. This, in turn, led to recession in Mexico and the threat of a domino effect on the currencies of other developing countries.

Arguing that economic collapse in the developing world would surely damage the U.S. economy, the Clinton administration asked Congress to approve a loan program that would stabilize the Mexican economy. The proposal involved loan guarantees rather than direct aid, but even so, it was massively unpopular. In the three polls I found, an average of 21 percent of those surveyed favored the loan program – probably disproportionately highly informed persons and persons of Mexican descent -- and 74 percent opposed. In these circumstances, Congress, which had recently cut domestic spending and raised taxes in order to balance the federal budget, refused to go along with what seemed like an American gift to Mexico.

The logic of the choice Clinton then faced was clear: He could heed public opinion as expressed in current polls but risk alienating the public opinion that would exist in November 1996 by increasing the likelihood of an American recession at that time. Or, alternatively, he could ignore public opinion as expressed in polls and play to the public opinion that would exist at election time. The fact that Clinton had, by that time, linked the U.S. and Mexican economies via NAFTA increased the political stakes.

Despite Clinton's reputation for pandering to polls, he ignored them in this instance and authorized $20 billion on the basis of his executive authority, along with concessions worth perhaps another $20 billion. For his pains, Clinton was immediately attacked by Rush Limbaugh, Ross Perot, and Pat Buchanan (though not Republican Senate Majority Leader Bob Dole, who supported Clinton on this issue). If Clinton's choice was between giving some of the biggest mouths in American politics an emotionally-charged round of ammunition to use in the context of a basically good economy, or denying them that ammunition at the cost of a sound economy, we should not be surprised by his decision.

This case suggests a generalization about how politicians should think about latent opinion: For cases in which a President can, by the levers of power he controls, alter the real world situation that will shape public opinion at the time of the next election, he should ignore public opinion as expressed in current polls and cater to future opinion. When, however, a President is powerless to affect the real world basis of future opinion, he should be wary of ignoring current opinion, because current opinion may still be in place at the time of the next election. The idea behind this proposition is that, as Fiorina (1981) pointed out, the public opinion that expresses itself in elections tends to be more concerned with ends than means.

Although I have not made a systematic study of Clinton's inclination to follow or ignore polls on tough issues, I have collected several important cases that seem to fit this generalization. Here are four that fit the scenario for ignoring public opinion:

-- As a candidate for President in 1992, Bill Clinton promised to increase "investments" in people, cut taxes for the middle class, and cut the budget deficit in half. In his first budget after taking office, he proposed some new investments, but also a significant tax increase for the middle class (mainly in the form of an energy tax), new taxes on Social Security benefits, and cuts in Medicare. Clinton wanted to cut Cost of Living Adjustments (COLAs) for Social Security as well, but the plan was vetoed by Congressional Democrats prior to being publicly announced. Polls taken before and after Clinton announced his budget plan showed, as would be expected, that the energy and social security tax provisions were unpopular, but that other elements of the plan, notably investments in education and tax increases on the rich, were popular. The interesting question is why, contrary to electoral promises and current polls, Clinton proposed the unpopular elements he did.

-- The North American Free Trade Agreement never had great support in public opinion polls,[9] and it was quite unpopular among one of Clinton's core groups, organized labor. Nevertheless, Clinton threw his full support behind NAFTA and won a close vote in Congress to pass it. Why?

-- With thousands of "boat people" fleeing a military regime in Haiti to come to the U.S. in the late summer of 1994, Clinton asked Congress for authorization to send U.S. troops to restore a Democratic government. It refused. Even though three recent polls showed that about 30 percent of the public favored unilateral U.S. military action and 65 percent opposed, Clinton made a televised speech to announce that he intended to order an invasion. Even after the invasion, however, public opinion remained nearly divided and quite dubious about the policy. Why offend public opinion over Haiti?

-- Throughout Clinton's first term, the mass media broadcast disheartening images of civil war and atrocity in Bosnia. By 1995, the public was willing to support air strikes against the

[9] In 25 national polls conducted in 1993, a plurality or majority opposed NAFTA in 18 polls, supported NAFTA in 6 polls, and split evenly in the final case.

Serbian side, but opposed sending U.S. ground troops to police a truce between the warring factions.[10] Nevertheless, Clinton instructed the State Department in summer 1995 to broker a deal among the contending factions that would be enforced by U.S. ground forces. By the end of the year, the so-called Dayton Accords had been ratified by the U.S. Senate, committing American peacekeeping forces to Bosnia. (Senator Dole, the likely Republican nominee for president in 1996, played a key role in securing Senate approval for the unpopular measure.) Why would an election-hungry president push to send American troops into harm's way in an election year?

The answer in each of these cases is, as I maintain, is that it was plausible for Clinton to believe that the policies he put into place would produce beneficial and visible results by the time of the 1996 election. In the cases of NAFTA, the Mexican loan, and the first budget proposal, the expected benefit was a marginally stronger economy. In the cases of Haiti and Bosnia, the main expected benefit was an end to disturbing images on the evening news and restoration of Pax Americana at what the president thought would be very low cost.

These cases, two of which I will further discuss in a moment, stand in contrast to two others: Gays in the military in early 1993 and welfare reform in 1996. The first involved a campaign promise by Clinton to end discrimination against gays in the military; the second involved a Republican-sponsored initiative to terminate federal responsibility for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). In neither case is it plausible to believe that Clinton controlled policy instruments that would affect the basis of public attitudes. So when polls showed public opposition to positions he had staked out, the president worked out face-saving surrenders with congressional leaders and moved on to other matters.

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10 No questions from mid-1995 capture the decision Clinton faced at that time. However, there was strong opposition to any plan for sending U.S. troops "to try to end the fighting." Even after Congress had authorized sending troops, the public opposed by a margin of 52 to 43 the plan to send "up to 20 thousand U.S. troops to Bosnia, as part of a NATO peacekeeping force, to enforce the peace agreement between Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia" (Public Opinion Online, Roper Center, May 31, 1996).

I think that my theoretical explanation for these cases – that politicians will disregard public opinion when they think they can play effectively to its long-term propensities and defer to it otherwise – is quite plausible within a general paradigm of political rationality. However, the classification of cases (i.e., measurement) necessary to empirically verify the claim raises problems, especially as regards Bosnia and the budget proposal. Let me therefore examine these cases in more detail.

Take the Bosnia case. First, what exactly distinguishes Bosnia from Vietnam besides the fact that it was possible to "save" Bosnia at low cost and impossible to do the same in Vietnam, thereby satisfying the public in Bosnia and creating a nightmare in Vietnam? Also, how do we know that Clinton acted from political pragmatism rather than, say, principle?

The answer to the first question is that very little distinguishes Bosnia from Vietnam except cost. Yet cost is no minor matter. The public may have been wiser about the dangers of intervention in Bosnia compared to Vietnam, but the key difference, according to my analysis, is not the nature of public opinion. It is the nature of the policy instruments at the disposal of the president in relation to the problem at hand: Even though the public didn't immediately realize it, the combatants in Bosnia, in contrast to those in Vietnam, were ready for peace and the introduction of a few thousand American ground troops was sufficient to achieve that peace. Thus, Clinton controlled a much more effective set of power levers in Bosnia than Kennedy and Johnson had in Vietnam. The focus of my analysis in this section is when politicians will ignore polls, and the key point is that they will do so when they believe they have the practical means of satisfying the public in the long run.

The question about motivation is more difficult. One can rarely be certain whether an individual politician in a particular case has acted from pragmatism or principle -- or anything else for that matter. It is, however, reasonable to assume that a politician's ideological principles are relatively fixed while opportunities and incentives to act on those principles vary. The latter, therefore, are the better bet to explain differences in behavior within the same individual. With

this in mind, consider the following analysis of Clinton's Bosnia decision by *Washington Post* columnist Jim Hoagland:

> Few cliches are as dear to American politicians as the claim that politics stops at the water's edge. But good politics can be good foreign policy. Bill Clinton is proving that on Bosnia.
>
> The president's muscular intervention to get a cease-fire in Bosnia after two years of dithering owes a lot to events on the ground. When Croatia's summer blitzkrieg shattered an overextended Bosnian Serb army, Clinton saw his chance and took it.
>
> But senior administration officials also point to an uncharacteristically forceful presidential directive to them to "bring clarity" to the Bosnian crisis before reelection campaigning engulfs Clinton early next year. They admit this campaign-driven directive was a major factor in a new American activism on Bosnia that has not yet run its course.
>
> If this activism is both sustained and productive . . . it will cast a new light on … this president, who came to Washington tagged by the media, the public and himself as a policy wonk.
>
> Wrong. Clinton is a politics wonk.
>
> Politics -- partisan and personal -- energize, inspire and focus Bill Clinton in a way that the detached decision-making of foreign affairs (and many other things) does not . . . The chance to hem in Bob Dole and other critics on Bosnia has at last given Clinton a passion and a drive on a foreign crisis that help stop the erosion of American leadership in global affairs -- at least temporarily (Hoagland, 1995).

Sending American troops to Bosnia was risky, but criticism from the Republican nominee for failing to clear up Bosnia was a certainty unless Clinton acted to defuse the issue. This, I suggest, is why Clinton ignored the polls on Bosnia.

The problem with this analysis is that the cost Clinton could expect to incur from American casualties in Bosnia was almost certainly greater than the small gain he could expect from

defusing the issue. But what were the expected chances of success if he sent U.S. troops? If they were high enough, the expected utility calculation could still run in favor of intervention.

As later news accounts indicated, American military leaders were reasonably confident that intervention could succeed – as, in fact, it has. If Clinton was acting on this expert opinion, as presumably he was, then Hoagland's inside account can be taken as evidence that Clinton was acting consistently with my rule: The president disregarded current polls on Bosnia because he had the means of affecting the real world situation to which the public would be responding once the presidential contest heated up, thereby "hemming in" his opponent.

The unexpected fiscal conservatism of Clinton's first budget likewise invites close analysis: Was Clinton a more instinctively principled and moderate Democrat than he has been given credit for? Or was he, as my analysis would suggest, merely a clever pragmatist? From Bob Woodward's inside account of decision-making in *The Agenda* (1994), the evidence points rather clearly to pragmatism. His key advisors – Alan Blinder, Alice Rivelin, Leon Panetta, and Lloyd Bentson – plus Fed Chairman Alan Greenspan all warned of a potential fiscal crisis if the federal budget deficit were allowed to continue to grow. The economic team stressed that the long-term performance of the economy depended on interest rates, and that interest rates in turn depended on the confidence of the bond market and the Federal Reserve that the federal government would bring its budget deficit under control. Clinton fairly consistently took the economic advice that he got, but he didn't enjoy doing so. During one presentation by his economic team, according to Woodward,

> Clinton's face turned red with anger and disbelief. "You mean to tell me that the success of the program and my reelection [nearly four years off at that point] hinges on the Federal Reserve and a bunch of fucking bond traders?" he responded in a half-whisper.
>
> Nods from [Blinder's] end of the table. Not a dissent.

> Clinton, it seemed to Blinder, perceived at this moment how much of his fate was passing into the hands of the unelected Alan Greenspan and the bond market. (p. 84)
>
> …By seizing control of the deficits and their economic future, Gore argued, they would be doing what was politically unpopular but right…. When people saw the boldness, there would be a surge of support for the plan. Gore, who had been saying that boldness was the essence of Franklin D. Roosevelt's program, again pointed to the New Deal legislation. "Look at the 1930s," he reminded.
>
> "Roosevelt was trying to help people," Clinton shot back. "Here we help the bond market, and we hurt the people who voted us in." (p. 93)

According to Woodward, Clinton reviewed every important element of his budget proposal, complaining about its stringencies as he went:

> [Clinton said] that he still planned to propose an increase in the percentage of Social Security benefits subject to taxes, even though it would mean a big jump for middle-income retirees. "All the voters live in Florida," he noted, only half-jokingly. The implications for the 1996 election were clear. Clinton had lost the state in 1992, but it would surely be lost again. "Bye-bye Florida," he said. (p. 135)

> At one point they were reviewing rural and agricultural programs, cutting away at what most of them [the economic advisers] considered indefensible special-interest subsidies.
>
> "Mr. President," Rivlin said enthusiastically. "I've got a slogan for your reelection." Taking off on his campaign promise to "end welfare as we know it," she proposed: "'I'm going to end welfare as we know it for farmers'"
>
> Clinton stiffened, looked at her, and snapped, "Spoken like a true city dweller." The former governor of Arkansas leaned across the table dramatically in her direction and added, "Farmers are good people. I know we have to do these things. We're going to make these cuts. But we don't have to feel good about it." (138-139)

> … Clinton still had qualms. Not only would he be unable to cut middle-class taxes as he had promised, but he would be raising taxes on the middle class. "These are the people who got screwed in the 80s," he said. "And it's a heck of a thing for me to propose this." (p. 139)

In taking much of the advice of his economic advisors, Clinton turned a cold shoulder to the advice of his political advisors, such as James Carville, Stanley Greenberg, Paul Begala, and Mandy Grunwald. As related by Woodward,

> "Why did we run," asked Stan Greenberg, pounding the table [at a meeting at which Clinton was not present]. … Deficit hawks and the Washington establishment had stolen Clinton's presidency. "The presidency has been hijacked," Greenberg said flatly. A near-fatal disconnection had taken place. The team of political advisers that understood Clinton and his extraordinary mix of political traditions – true Democrat, populist, Southern pulse-taker, brainy policy student – was out in the cold. As a result, the vital link between Clinton and the voters was being severed [according to Greenberg]… (p. 97)

> Mandy Grunward, for one, did not share the jubilation [when financial markets reacted well to the Clinton plan]. She believed that the bond market thrived on bad news for the middle class. The reaction seemed to indicate that if Clinton didn't plan to screw the middle class, he was not serious about deficit reduction. (p. 108)

> Clinton liked frankness, and Begala was a natural with direct communication…
>
> "Mr. President," Begala said, "why are you listening to these people [the economic team]? They did not support you. It's not what you're about."
>
> "We need them," Clinton said…. "We can't do anything for people unless we reduce the deficit."

…"Mr. President, we're just driving at a magic number [i.e., a deficit reduction target of $140 billion]. That number, it's like there's some magic in it." How did that happen? Begala asked.

"They love their country," Clinton said of his economic team. "They're working hard at this. What do you want me to do? We can't lie about the deficit. Can't do that."

"I agree," Begala said.

"Then stop," Clinton ordered. (p. 136-37)

Since Woodward's account of these events is based heavily on the testimony of Clinton loyalists, it may be overly sympathetic to Clinton. Yet, there is no reason to doubt the central theme – Clinton's political advisers were put "out in the cold" as the President made the political decision to govern, in this instance, on the basis of pragmatic criteria. Nor is there cause to doubt the reason that Clinton gave for doing so – that making the economy run well over the long run requires adopting the kinds of policies that please bond traders more, at least in the short run, than the voters who had supported him in the election.

In formulating his first budget, Clinton faced a public that, as is often the case, wanted a free lunch. Its inconsistent demands were not, in this case, latent, but were openly expressed in polls about budget preferences. Clinton disregarded this expressed opinion, betting, in effect, that a strong economy was what the public wanted most of all.

Summary.

In this section, I proposed a low-level generalization about when presidents may be expected to ignore polls and defer instead to their reading of latent opinion. The key idea is that when presidents possess policy levers sufficient to determine the real world conditions upon which the public will ultimately judge them at election time, they should ignore present opinion as expressed in polls and defer to their reading of latent opinion. Otherwise they should do the reverse. I offered very short vignettes of seven policy decisions, five of which were intended to illustrate the first type of case and two of which were intended to illustrate the second.

I cannot claim that this brief exercise has strong evidentiary value, but I hope it may nonetheless suggest how more rigorous testing might be done.

IV. The Rationality of Inconsistent Preferences

It is commonplace to disparage the public for the inconsistency of its opinion. However, this disparagement may be unwarranted. In many cases, pressuring politicians to do the impossible could serve the public's interest as well as any feasible alternative.

Taxing and spending is perhaps the classic case in which opinion inconsistency arises. Majorities want low taxes, high levels of government service, and a balanced budget – and, for most of the 1980s and 1990s, a constitutional amendment to force a balanced budget. Depending on the particular question wording, citizens also want government to protect them from the health and safety hazards generated by the modern economy, but they also want government to keep small and let competition reign in the private sector. Voters want tariff walls high enough to protect American jobs, but they also want cheap foreign imports and free trade for U.S. exports. And they also want the higher level of economic prosperity that, as economists almost unanimously contend, derives from free trade. In the area of foreign policy, they want, generally speaking, the benefits of an assertive national foreign policy without having to pay the costs of this benefit.

There is nothing obviously irrational about a preference for "having your cake and eating it too." Commenting on the sizeable number of citizens who said that "the government should cut taxes even if it means putting off important things that need to be done" and yet also favored increased spending on social welfare, Key wrote.

> [F]rom their standpoint their position is comprehensible. A simple calculus of self-interest makes simultaneous support of tax reduction and expansion of welfare activities entirely consistent for them. (p. 168)[11]

The same can be said for other instances in which the public makes apparently unreasonable demands. Who, after all, wouldn't prefer to have his enemies kept at bay without the need for expensive armaments and occasional wars? Who wouldn't prefer a lean government effectively looking out for everyone's health and safety rather than a bloated one? The fact that outparty politicians have an incentive to give voice to the public's "unreasonable" demands only encourages citizens in the natural propensity to try to get as much as possible out of government for the least possible cost.

The problem, if there is one, is the effect of the public's demands on those responsible for making policy. As Key comments on the preference for high spending and low taxes:

> For the system as a whole … this combination [of preferences for high spending and low taxes] is irrational and creates problems in program-making. (Ibid)

In no case is the pernicious effect of inconsistent policy preferences more clear than in the case of Vietnam. Because the public was, in Johnson's estimation, unwilling either to accept a defeat in Vietnam or to pay the cost of winning, the country pursued a perverse policy of getting itself into a serious war without the level of commitment necessary to achieve the goal that presumably made war necessary. Similarly in the case of budget politics, the public's preference for high levels of government services with low taxes pressured politicians to indulge in a variety of accounting gimmicks and even constitutional amendments to hide their inability to live up to the promises that political pressure forced them to make.

Although these pernicious effects ought not to be minimized, one should, at the same time, recognize that potential benefits may also exist. Consider the following analogy to market

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[11] Hansen has demonstrated a high level of consistency in the public's attitudes on a series of taxing, spending, and deficit issues in the early 1990s. However, the consistency mainly indicated support for a status quo in which there was a very large budget deficit.

capitalism: Consumers entering the marketplace want high quality goods at low cost, whether cars, computers, or hamburgers. They can generally recognize both low cost and high quality when they see them. But, as in politics, they have no idea how either quality or cost are achieved and do not care to find out. They simply want the best of both worlds without paying a lot of attention to details. But with producers having an incentive to satisfy the unreasonable demands of customers as best they can, the result has been a history of steady improvements in both the quality and cost of consumer goods.

If consumers, in their ignorance, told producers that they wanted either the highest quality regardless of cost, or the lowest cost regardless of quality, they would either go broke quickly or acquire countless products that failed to work as advertised. They would, in other words, fare worse than they do in demanding both low cost and high quality.

Without wishing to make any grandiose claims about what exactly happens in the political marketplace, one can argue that the same general forces are at work. The public's perhaps unconscious strategy of making unreasonable demands, in combination with an electoral system that encourages politicians to exert themselves to satisfy those demands, may often lead to reasonably good outcomes. If, on the other hand, voters cheerfully agreed either to pay whatever taxes were deemed necessary by politicians to fund "essential" services, or to content themselves with only those services that were affordable at very low cost, the result could be satisfactory to few or none.

Market failures do occur in business, and no doubt they do so as well in politics. Thus, to admit that "unreasonable" or inconsistent public demands on government sometimes lead to pernicious effects, as they appear to have done in the case of Vietnam, falls much short of a demonstration that such demands are, in general, self-defeating. Recall, moreover, that the United States did in the end win the Cold War, and did so at much lower overall cost than was feared at its inception. It is not inconceivable that Vietnam, by upholding the credibility of American alliances and thereby keeping pressure on the Soviet Union, contributed to that result.

Or, even if Vietnam was a sheer waste of American and Vietnamese lives, it may have been a much smaller disaster than would have been expected under some different system of political incentives. Recall as well that the federal government did eventually manage to achieve a balanced budget at relatively high levels of government service and then enact a giant tax cut to cap off the achievement. My claim, then, is not that market competition is the answer to all the ills of democratic politics, including a woefully uninformed and apathetic public. It is only that the public's apparent propensity to make inconsistent demands on government decision-makers may be a more effective strategy than it initially seems and a reasonably good strategy overall.

In evaluating the efficacy of unreasonable demands, one needs also to consider the alternative. Is it reasonable to believe that any mass public will *ever* devote itself sufficiently to public affairs to be able to make informed, reasonable judgments on the vast number of issues on which it is called upon to render judgments in public opinion polls? Obviously not. Suppose, though, that it were possible. Which, then, would be the better mechanism for democratic decision-making: A mass electorate deliberating on an issue like Vietnam under the shadow of the nuclear bomb, the tutelage of politicians like Johnson and Goldwater, and the guidance of the news media that have triumphed in the current environment of cutthroat competition for high ratings? Or, on the other hand, the judgments of politician-presidents whose instincts and incentives are to anticipate what the public will want at the end of the day and after the dust has settled?

If forced to make a choice, one might reasonably prefer a government driven by inconsistent latent public opinion to a government driven by what would, under the best of circumstances, pass for informed public opinion. I do not assert this as a firm conclusion but rather as a suggestion to be evaluated.

V. The Future of Latent Opinion

Key's notion of latent opinion – that the public opinion politicians care most about is the public opinion that will exist at the next election – seems at first encounter sensible but

scientifically retrograde. It seems sensible because it is obviously what office-seeking politicians should care most about, but retrograde because of the difficulty of studying something that is latent rather than manifest. Key's cheerful admission of the seemingly mystic qualities of latent opinion reinforced the latter impression and may well have contributed to its neglect over the years. Yet, as I have tried to show in this essay, the public does have latent tendencies that are at least as real as many of it attitude statements, which, though manifest, are often best understood as non-attitudes. Latent dispositions to rally-round-the-flag in crises, to vote on the basis of economic performance, and to resist painful tradeoffs are all genuine response tendencies that politicians are prudent to heed and political scientists are therefore wise to study.

What is perhaps more open to dispute is whether Key's concept of latent opinion is necessary for this study to occur. After all, rally effects and economic voting – as well as the tendency of politicians to anticipate them – have been thoroughly studied without reference to the concept of latent opinion. Similarly, my conjecture that the public reliably resists painful tradeoffs could be investigated as a free-standing assertion. Finally, my contention that politicians will sometimes ignore current opinion in order to play to future has opinion has been investigated by scholars who appear to owe no debt whatsoever to Key's concept of latent opinion. These studies are worth pausing to review.

Jeffrey Cohen (1997) has undertaken an ambitious quantitative analysis of how presidents from Eisenhower to Bush I responded to public opinion. His argument, quite similar in flavor to mine, is that presidents will respond to public opinion on symbolic concerns but follow their own best judgment on policy matters on which the public may later judge them. His evidence on symbolic responsiveness is persuasive: At the level of rhetoric and ideological tone, presidents do seem to follow public opinion. (Evidence on presidential responsiveness to the public's ideological leanings in Stimson, MacKuen, and Erikson [1995] also follows this pattern.)

At the level of concrete policy proposals, Cohen's evidence – and particularly his case evidence – is somewhat mixed. Sometimes presidents ignored opinion and sometimes they respond to it, depending, as Cohen argues, on the strength of their policy convictions.

The other important study to venture onto this turf is a formal analysis of presidential decision-making by Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts (2001).). Its conclusions were also arrived at independently of mine but are strikingly similar. When the probability is high that voters will find out by the next election whether a president's policies serve the public's interests, presidents are rational to disregard short-term expression of public opinion and play to long-term public interests. When, however, presidents face close elections and problems having little chance of short-term resolution, they will sometimes find it rational to "pander" to voters – that is, to enact the policies voters want even if the presidents have private information that the policies do not actually serve voter interests. Even very popular presidents may find it rational to pander if they face problems that are unlikely be resolved before the next election. Even very unpopular presidents may ignore public opinion if they believe the benefits of their decision may become clear to voters by election day. Thus, Canes-Wrone, Herron, and Shotts formalize much of my argument and, in some ways I have not described, go beyond it.[12]

Given, then, that most of what I have described in this paper as evidence for the importance of latent opinion can be – and mostly has been – discussed without reference to the concept of latent opinion, what is the value of keeping the concept of latent opinion scientifically alive?

One answer to this question is clarity. If, across a range of seemingly disparate situations from Vietnam to economic policy-making, politicians are doing roughly the same thing, it

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[12] In a subsequent paper, Canes-Wrone and Shotts (2002) find support for the predictions of this theoretical model. When election are distant, presidents from Nixon to Clinton ignored public budget priorities across 11 domains, tending instead to follow their own ideological proclivities or private information. But in the later halves of their terms, presidents facing closing elections were less ideological and more responsive to public preferences. Notably, the empirical analysis is carried out at the level of discrete policy choices rather than broad indices, and presidential responsiveness is not uniform but instead varies by the immediacy of electoral risk.

clarifies our understanding of these situations to point out the common feature and to have a concept for pointing it out.

Another answer is communication. One of the banes of political science is how much research is conducted by specialists -- in foreign policy, the presidency, public opinion, and so forth – who are studying the same thing without knowing it. Specialization is obviously necessary to understand the unique features of each domain. But ways must be found for the specialists, all of whom have their hands full simply trying to keep up with their own subjects, to communicate with each other about what they have in common. Latent opinion, a concept that travels easily across domains, is highly useful for that purpose.

But a more important reason for retaining the concept of latent opinion is parsimony. If a concept can provide a convincingly unified account of seemingly disparate phenomena, the account is more persuasive by virtue of that fact. Consider my anecdotal account of U.S. policy in Vietnam. A vast body of research exists on this case, most of it done by specialists in international relations in general or even the Vietnam war in particular. This research has turned up dozens of explanations for U.S. policy. If, in this situation, a researcher were to write a new book on Vietnam stressing Johnson's fear of forcing the public to make a painful tradeoff, it would stand as simply another explanation for an already over-determined event. If, however, the researcher were to amass evidence that the public frequently resists making unwelcome tradeoffs, that politicians always strive mightily to avoid forcing it do so, and that Vietnam policy fits this pattern, this evidence would count as more than simply another argument about U.S. policy in Vietnam. It would count as systematic evidence about the cause of policy in Vietnam.

Systematic evidence cannot be gathered without concepts that span multiple cases. Many of the concepts used for this purpose in political science are simple, unimaginative ones, like war, budget policy, and economic policy, and can therefore span only a narrow set of cases. Latent opinion is a more general concept, in the sense that it can span a broader and more seemingly

disparate set of cases. For example, it works in the study of Congressional as well as presidential decision-making (Arnold, 1990; Zaller, 1995)

It would make no sense, then, to assert that because political scientists are studying latent opinion in many contexts without reference to the concept that the concept is unimportant. The more sensible assertion is that latent opinion is especially valuable because it can help clarify and unify research that already exists.

My conclusion is therefore that latent opinion remains a valuable tool of public opinion analysis. Politicians do not always play to latent opinion, as Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) clearly demonstrate, but they often seem to do so. The clearest evidence of the importance of latent opinion is the disparate research it spans, some of which has as much precision as any in political science. The central idea of latent opinion – that politicians are normally most concerned with response propensities that will become manifest at some point after they act, most likely at the time of the next election – should be routinely taught to beginning and advanced students, and should be better integrated into future studies of public opinion.

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