Democratic Politics and Survey Research

LYNN M. SANDERS
University of California, Berkeley

Democratically inspired critics identify a number of problems with the contemporary identification of survey research and public opinion. Surveys are said to normalize or rationalize opinion, to promote state or corporate rather than democratic interests, to constrain authentic forms of participation, and to force an individualized conception of public opinion. Some of these criticisms are relatively easily answered by survey researchers. But the criticisms contain a complaint that survey researchers have largely failed to address: that survey research discourages the public, visible, and face-to-face generation of opinion. Public opinion researchers who use surveys paradoxically seek the opinions of citizens in private, nonpolitical situations. But nothing inherent in the methods of survey research requires this private focus. The author argues that by reframing the survey’s unit of analysis and considering alternatives to standard, national samples in political surveys, new democratic possibilities within survey research may be found.

Numerous critics have observed over the course of this century that survey research has become conflated with public opinion (e.g., Habermas 1996, 362; Herbst 1993; Gunn 1989; Ginsberg 1986; Blumer [1948] 1986). Usually this observation is a regretful one. Something is lost or injured, the critics say, in the association of public opinion and polling. And while the exact character of this loss or injury depends on exactly who bemoans it, what is usually mourned is democratic politics.

This article challenges this association between survey research and democratic injury. The losses critics lament are offset, I argue, by the contributions that survey researchers may make to democratic politics. To identify these contributions, I conduct a pragmatic
analysis of opinion surveying, one that situates survey research historically, criticizes its practices from within, and concludes that survey research may be marshalled as a tool for “free experimental social inquiry” (Dewey [1927] 1991, 196).

Survey research is an entrenched institution in the United States in general and in American politics particularly. It is clearly linked with democratic claims; especially it is supposed to help identify the “people’s voice.” The relationship of surveys to American politics and public opinion has varied over time, however. A pragmatic analysis emphasizes this historical contingency. By recognizing that survey research is a historically situated political institution as much as a scientific technology, a pragmatic analysis alerts us to alternative lines along which surveying might have developed and therefore to new possibilities that might be found within it.

To say that survey research is a historically embedded and politically entrenched institution in our polity also implies that it is a mechanism of public expression as much as a tool for studying it. Herbert Blumer ([1948] 1986, 201) emphasized the variety of mechanisms other than surveys through which public opinion might be voiced: “letters, telegrams, petitions, resolutions, lobbies, delegations.” Similar lists have been generated by Charles Tilly (1983) and others. Although lists like these are frequently presented as alternatives to surveys, a pragmatic analysis lets us regard surveys as another mechanism on the list, rather than something foreign or external to politics and public opinion.

When public opinion researchers regard surveys as a form of political participation (e.g., Brehm 1993; Verba 1996), they are making exactly such a claim for inclusion: surveys, they suggest, should be regarded as part of what Tilly (1986) calls our repertoire of political action. If public opinion is partly constituted by the mechanisms available for its expression—if public opinion is what we see expressed in letters, petitions, and surveys—then it follows logically that public opinion is, at least in part, what is expressed through surveys.¹

Such a position is anathema to many critics. Public opinion surveys, they say, somehow aren’t really about public opinion. Not only is volunteering to participate in a survey contingent on being selected for a sample, at least insofar as scientific sampling procedures are employed.² Something still is lacking in survey research, keeping it from qualifying as a genuine form of public expression. In the next section, I clarify this problem.
THE PROBLEM

At the most fundamental level, democratic critics challenge survey researchers to recognize how the enterprise of surveying erodes the public quality of public opinion. If public life is already elusive or intermittent in a complex, postindustrial society, survey research amplifies these trends with regard to public expression, forcing a privatized conception of public opinion. Critics charge that the genuinely public character of public opinion cannot be captured in opinion surveys; indeed, public exchange between citizens is ruled out by survey researchers who seek to get inside the heads of respondents as gently and unobtrusively as possible, urging citizens to reveal what’s on their minds. Such an approach conceives of public opinion as private rather than public, a point I will enlarge below.

Public opinion surveys seem therefore incapable of doing more than collecting together the isolated opinions of separated private citizens. When critics bemoan the loss to democratic politics associated with the conflation of opinion surveying and public opinion, what they claim is missed the most is public exchange. Face-to-face confrontation, as well as the visible engagement of citizens with each other, is both what gives public opinion its public character in the eyes of many democratic critics and what has deteriorated most clearly with the rise of modern surveying practices.

In this article, I show that the rejoinders opinion researchers have offered to democratic critics generally fail to engage this critique. Even opinion researchers who claim that surveys represent deliberative processes fail to acknowledge this loss of the public in opinion surveying. And though there is an important and increasingly orthodox position within the survey research community that views opinion formation as socially influenced, researchers still clearly identify public opinion with individuals. For these reasons, survey researchers’ democratic defenses of their enterprise have been limited.

There is, however, room within the practice of survey research to expand this defense. Nothing inherent in the methodology of surveying forces this privatized conception of public opinion. Granted, the habits and practices of contemporary survey researchers do indeed reflect and reinforce this privatized conception. And I will argue that this privatized conception is methodologically very convenient. But these habits and practices are also flexible and contingent. They are conventions, not methodological dictates.
Surveys in fact offer means to reflect, to analyze, and even to provide the public mechanisms that construct genuinely public opinion. To recognize this, it is necessary to reexamine some of the most fundamental assumptions and most entrenched practices of opinion researchers. This reexamination leads me to two distinct, though related, claims about how survey research can illuminate a more public conception of public opinion. First, I argue that survey research need not always take the attitudes of the individual survey respondent as its unit of analysis. Survey data are arranged in a case-by-variable matrix, in which an individual record contains information on each variable for each case. But individual records can represent any unit of analysis. Survey researchers can depart from one of the practices most familiar to them: they need not link individual records to individual persons, necessarily.

Second, this departure from a familiar practice invites a deeper reconsideration of the nature of political representation in survey research. Surveys usually represent public opinion as the aggregated views of citizens in a conventional political unit: the nation, a state, or municipality. But I argue here that surveys may represent political units other than conventional ones. Survey data may represent public exchange between persons as well as—indeed, better than—the private, internal views of individual citizens. When we aggregate these new units, these public exchanges, then we represent public opinion as something other than the views of aggregated individuals. We produce a sample drawn from a universe of public exchanges, for example. Thus, survey data may be aggregated to represent public opinion associated with unconventional, even counterfactual political arrangements.

This revised perspective on opinion surveying, which emphasizes, among other things, how survey research might illuminate counterfactual conditions, is not only consistent with developments in contemporary survey research. It also harks back to pragmatic arguments made by democratic theorists earlier this century. The “free experimental social inquiry” advocated by Dewey ([1927] 1991) may include the scientific investigation of rare or elusive but venerated political circumstances, such as the face-to-face exchange between citizens associated with deliberative democracy. Surveys can move beyond faithful descriptions of the status quo to represent such circumstances.

My procedure here will be to revisit some of the criticisms made by democratically inspired critics and to explain how survey research
developed in a way that fuels these criticisms. I list the rejoinders survey researchers can supply to these critics while acknowledging the fundamental limit of these rejoinders. The heart of my criticism is that survey researchers, for the most part, remain too committed to a conception of public opinion as private to offer a satisfactory rejoinder to democratic critics. After discussing these issues, I then argue that survey researchers can in fact represent within surveys the public that seems to have been lost in opinion research, and I outline how they might do so. Finding this lost public is an essential task in developing a democratic and pragmatic defense of surveying.

FOUR CRITICISMS OF SURVEY RESEARCH

Given widespread criticism of surveys, the project of finding democratic possibilities in opinion research may seem at first an implausible one. There are four broad sets of critiques made by theorists: that surveys force an individualistic conception of public opinion; that they represent state or corporate rather than democratic interests; that they prevent egalitarian, undominated expression; and that they are insidious, disciplinary institutions defining normality and deviance in politics. Each of these critiques reflects some version of a worry about the loss of the public in survey research.

The most important and enduring complaint made by critics is that survey researchers treat public opinion as the aggregation of individual opinions (Blumer [1948] 1986, 202; Herbst 1993, 2). As such, it has become a psychological or attitudinal, more than a political, phenomenon. Aggregative and social-psychological conceptions of public opinion appear to contradict the central democratic rationale for attending to public opinion: that it represents some genuine, public, or political expression. To the extent that aggregative and psychological conceptions are active—for instance, in enterprises like surveying—they seem to undermine a concept of public opinion as open, debated, and critical.

Herbert Blumer’s ([1948] 1986) criticism of this individualistic conception of public opinion supplied two hypotheses regarding the sources of the conception. Survey researchers’ sampling procedures, Blumer insisted, disregarded the social niche or structural position he saw as absolutely crucial in the formation of public opinion:
Public opinion is not an action of a population of disparate individuals having equal weight but is a function of a structured society, differentiated into a network of different kinds of groups and individuals having differential weight and influence and occupying different strategic positions. (P. 205)

Furthermore, Blumer insisted, the fact that “voters constitute a population of disparate individuals, each of whom has equal weight to the others” does not legitimate the extension of this individualistic conception to the study of public opinion (p. 205).

Blumer’s ([1948] 1986) criticism emphasized the way that structures external to the individual are a fundamental constituent of public opinion, neither something strictly apart from it, nor something impinging on it, nor something merely influencing it. He distinguished the “process” of public opinion from mass actions, such as “casting ballots” and “purchasing toothpaste” (p. 207). Public opinion, for Blumer and other critics, is organic, not additive.

This criticism of the additive conception also implies that surveys are a poor substitute for genuinely mutual, reflective, and truly deliberative consideration of public matters. To try, as survey researchers do, to capture underlying attitudes, essentially unreconstructed inner states, is not to measure deliberately formed opinion. Habermas ([1962] 1993, 243) points out that attitudinal conceptualizations contradict the purposes of a political, public sphere; aggregative and social psychological views of public opinion are “not bound to rules of public discussion or forms of verbalization in general, nor need [they] be concerned with political problems or even be addressed to political authorities.” If public opinion is not the product of a critical, genuinely public discussion, it seems to lose its democratic purchase.

A second general criticism is that surveys consolidate and enhance state power, allowing governments to anticipate and suppress public criticism. This criticism is often formulated as an extension of the last critique—that of the individualistic, attitudinal conception embodied in surveys. The enhancement of state power is accomplished by the preemptive measurement of unexpressed, inarticulate public opinion in the form of psychological attitudes. Ginsberg (1986) is a well-known proponent of the identification of the rise of attitude polling and the consolidation of state power, offering a particularly invidious example:
Charged with the task of preventing repetitions of the riots that rocked American cities during the 1960s, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders sponsored and reviewed a large number of surveys of black attitudes on a variety of political, social, and economic questions. These surveys allowed the commission to identify a number of attitudes held by blacks that were said to have contributed to their disruptive behavior. . . . The effect of polling was, in essence, to help the government find a way to not accommodate the opinions blacks had expressed in the streets of the urban ghettos of the United States. (P. 72)

Ginsberg sees opinion polling as a device by which information about attitudes may be used by states to suppress other expressions of opinion. Relatedly, Noelle-Neumann (1984) sees surveys as mechanisms through which the preferences of government or other elites are communicated to and imposed on survey respondents; surveys, with their standardized questionnaires and restricted response categories, suppress the articulation of alternative points of view. Bourdieu ([1971] 1993) points out that research is an expensive and technically complex enterprise, which produces incentives for researchers mechanically to reflect the political agendas of the powerful state and corporate actors who subsidize them. Again, this imposed structure poses a threat to public deliberation. When such externally imposed agendas are reflected in highly structured interviews and reinforced through the dissemination of results from surveys presented as public opinion, this suppresses the articulation of alternative perspectives that seems crucial to broad-based, democratic deliberation.

In this connection, opinion surveys are, third, often said to constrain active, deliberate participation and therefore to produce inauthentic politics. Survey researchers determine which issues should be addressed on surveys and how the questions should be posed to survey respondents. The standardized interview protocols associated with modern surveying prevent respondents from ranging freely through their considerations to articulate opinions in ways that fall outside the format developed by the survey researcher (Smaling 1996). John Dryzek (1990, 167) explains that researchers “have a subtle stake” in constraining citizens to react to the survey instrument because their scientific generalizations “are meaningful only if behavior is repetitive and regularized across individuals and across time.”

This criticism sometimes takes the form of an argument that respondents should construct the terms of the survey interview in order to be empowered, rather than responding according to the artificial structure imposed by researchers before any respondents
participate in the survey. Some researchers imagine that there is a way that survey interviewing could become more egalitarian, mutual, and even empowering to respondents: “Various attempts to restructure the interviewee-interviewer relationship so as to empower respondents are designed to encourage them to find and speak in their own ‘voices’” (Mishler 1986, 118). More participatory research is expected to issue in positive political effects: “they may know themselves better as individuals and as a community” (Park 1993, 13).

Finally, survey research is, it is sometimes claimed, an insidious institution. Indeed, surveys are a nearly perfect disciplinary institution, according to terms outlined by students of Foucault (see Goldstein 1984). The space of the interview is highly articulated, with labor within it specialized and divided. Researchers or clients determine questions, trained interviewers pose them, and respondents answer them. Furthermore, there is a serial quality to interviews: interviews are identical repetitions as long as the survey is in the field. The units of surveys are interchangeable: within the framework of probability sampling, individual citizens stand in for each other. And, of course, “surveying” bears an etymological relationship to discipline, or surveiller in Foucault’s French title. Joining Noelle-Neumann and others, the Foucauldian critique of surveying suggests that the observatory mechanism is coercive and constraining. The core of the disciplinary critique is that surveying normalizes or rationalizes public opinion, defining modal and deviant positions, thereby reducing or minimizing unconventional or subversive expression (Herbst 1993).

Though Foucauldians do not join other critics in advocating democratic discussion or deliberation, they clearly worry about the imposition of power and obscuring the mechanisms by which it is exercised. They too lament the loss of the (visible) public, suggesting that some more insidious form of power is unleashed in its absence. The critic Nikolas Rose (1996) shares Benjamin Ginsberg’s concern about the replacement of public expression with the identification of individual attitudes in surveys. When discussing the association of surveying and attitudinal research that took place during the 1930s and 1940s, he asks “what was born when an attitude became an invisible psychological state rather than a visible posture of the body?” (Rose 1996, 123). Similarly, Ginsberg (1986, 69) complains of “the advent of polling transformed public opinion from a behavioral to an attitudinal phenomenon.”
This worry about the loss of public life derives something from Arendt’s (1958) emphasis on visibility in politics. To be political is to appear before others, Arendt said. Individuals are fundamentally different when they address each other in public, outside of the everyday realm of necessary existence. Blumer, Ginsberg, and other critics who stress these active, visible, and organic elements of public opinion share a conception of it as fundamentally constituted in public or, indeed, nonexistent apart from public engagement. As such, public opinion must be something other than an individual-level phenomenon. This is the predominant strain of criticism of public opinion polling, running to some degree through each of the criticisms named above. It is what public opinion researchers must engage but also what eludes them most.

MINIMALIST REJOINDERS FROM SURVEY RESEARCH

Many elements of the criticisms outlined above are handled relatively easily by survey researchers. Surveys do not unnaturally constrain participation but instead offer means to identify the constraints afflicting all politics; they aren’t disproportionately afflicted by state or corporate interests; finally, they offer some means to articulate the opinion associated with a latent public, particularly under oppressive conditions. In this section, I elaborate these rejoinders from survey research. But I call them minimalist because important as they are, they evade the core criticism that surveys cannot represent genuinely public opinion.

One criticism we saw above—that survey research undemocratically and unnaturally imposes agendas and constrains participation—also suggested that more naturally occurring institutions carry fewer such implications. But participating in a survey, either as investigator, interviewer, or respondent, is no less natural than voting, meeting in a town hall, serving on a jury, or any other political practice. It is also surely the case that the purportedly natural deliberations occurring in town halls, community meetings, and juries are also afflicted by undemocratic intrusions of state and corporate interests and suffer from problems of domination similar to those attributed to surveys.

It is, to be sure, the case that surveys entail defined and unequal roles, as Dryzek (1990, 161) points out in his criticism of survey research. But the fact that subject status is distributed unequally
within the context of the survey does not distinguish it from other forms of politics. Surveying is distinctive, though, in its ability to identify the consequences of, and generalize about, these particular distributions of power. Dryzek (1990, 178-80) rejects this form of generalization, but surely the empirical investigation of the consequences of imposing particular agendas—exactly as surveys do explicitly—is of interest to democrats. Furthermore, surely it is a boon to democrats to be able to make strong generalizations about the scope and extent of these consequences.

We also saw critics worry about the association between survey research and state or corporate power. Surveying is, indeed, a practice that is strongly associated with the rise of the modern state. But it is not and has never been a simple reflection of state power. Since its inception, surveying has been used both by governments collecting statistics to rule more effectively or comprehensively and by radicals and reformers to challenge that rule. At the end of the nineteenth century and the dawn of the twentieth, reformers energetically produced surveys to expose the effects of poverty and to instill a sense of community (see, generally, Bulmer, Bales, and Sklar 1991). Earlier, antislavery activists conducted numerous surveys of free blacks to produce data to back various egalitarian political arguments (Davis 1972; McPherson 1964). At various points in American history, surveys have been a tool of conservatives and egalitarians, the state and the disenfranchised, the status quo and political insurgents.

More recently, survey researchers have claimed that attitudinal research might provide a mechanism for speaking truth to power. Again, we can look to the history of survey research to find the roots of these claims. One history of social scientific surveying connects early survey research with attitudinal conceptions, yet suggests that attitudinal research could offer a challenge to state power:

The objective data provided by the surveys were uniquely effective in mobilising “public opinion,” that amorphous combination of middle-class and working-class attitudes that activated politicians and labour leaders alike within the American political environment. Surveys could get action (especially when linked with sensationalist press reports) even when “monster” meetings and petitions could not. (Bulmer, Bales, and Sklar 1991, 26)

Against the criticism that attitude surveying consolidates state power, opinion researchers might claim that it also holds the potential to challenge it. Along these lines, while conceding that surveys might
sometimes produce pacified, manipulated, or, in Ginsberg’s (1986) terms, domesticated public opinion, Donald Kinder (1998, 784) proposes that “it seems lunkheaded to deny that the public opinion survey might also have some positive value. In clarifying and communicating what citizens want and need from their government, surveys might actually enhance the likelihood that they get it.”

Particularly when public expression is suppressed, whether by overt political oppression or the more subtle pressures of social etiquette, attitudinal research provides a way to allow citizens to express contrary views or even exercise resistance. In their study of trends in American racial attitudes, Schuman, Steeh, and Bobo (1985, 44) defend attitudinal research on the basis that some attitudes are quite real and useful to know about . . . one person may dislike another yet behave in a polite and friendly manner toward the other person, whether out of natural courtesy, convention, or a need to please someone more powerful. At a societal level, people living in a police state (or, in earlier times, in slavery), in order to survive, may have to behave in ways quite different from their own inclinations.

Here attitudes are seen as a preserve of unarticulated challenge.

This defense of attitudinal research is a particularly fitting one for the conditions of an impoverished public sphere. It does not purport to realize the broader ambition of a rich, sustained, and open public discussion but rather rests content in its important reminder that attitudinal research might identify or even preserve a latent public. Rather than dispute Ginsberg’s (1986) contention that attitudinal research preempts and puts down a critical public, it simply reminds us of the other side of the question—that we might never see this critical public apart from attitudinal surveys.

Yet this public remains an aggregation of isolated, independent individuals. The rejoinders from survey research offered above are minimalist because it remains the case that “the temptation appears overwhelming to shift the level of understanding and analysis to that of independent individuals . . . abstracted from time, place and setting” (Huckfeldt and Sprague 1993, 281). Survey researchers can point out that attitudinal research is sometimes politically laudable; even when a public is unmobilized or silent, attitudinal surveys can demonstrate when the wishes of the citizenry are at odds with government action. They can point out that surveys are highly representative in descriptive terms (Verba 1996; Brehm 1993). But because they remain committed to the analysis of individuals in isolation from
each other, they cannot claim that survey research can find the lost public in public opinion. In fact, for various reasons, surveys purporting to analyze public opinion in fact provide data about privately situated individuals. This is a contradictory position that is difficult for both survey researchers and democratic theorists to abide. In the next section, I discuss how this came to pass.

HOW SURVEY RESEARCH LOST THE PUBLIC

Though surveying existed for centuries before, survey research as we know it today is a product of the twentieth century, one enabled by the application in the 1930s and 1940s of probability theory to survey sampling.5 The linkage in those decades between probability theory and surveying made possible the social scientific project of making inferences from small samples to larger, underlying populations. And, as Blumer’s ([1948] 1986) criticism of polling suggested in 1948, with the new application of probability theory, sampling procedures assumed an unprecedented role in shaping our understanding of public opinion.

Probability sampling prompted an urgency to associate public opinion with an underlying population from which a sample could be drawn. This underlying population was, Blumer ([1948] 1986) noted, and still is, Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, 105) point out, assumed to consist of “individual citizens who are isolated and independent from each other.”6 This assumption may seem relatively innocuous. After all, what is the nation composed of if not individual citizens? And, therefore, where might public opinion come from if not from them? Yet, both democratic theorists and survey researchers want a more organic conception of public opinion, where public opinion represents a process of genuinely public exchange.

Certainly, the individualistic perspective was and is a methodologically convenient and powerful assumption, and on the face of it, it seems not obviously far-fetched. Yet, it also carries enormous political consequences. The assumption has produced the fundamental contradiction of modern public opinion research, where public opinion is assumed always, ultimately, to be made by private individuals. It is this underlying, fundamental contradiction that accounts for the inability of survey researchers, even those who characterize survey research in terms of collective deliberation, to offer a satisfactory rejoinder to critics. How did we get here?
Several features that we associate with the technologies of contemporary survey research preceded the mid-century development of the probability sample survey. With the introduction of probability sampling, however, these preexisting characteristics of surveying became more important elements of the newer, inference-based, social scientific rubric. Standardized wordings in questionnaires and interview protocols, extensive training of interviewers, and numerical coding of response categories had been features of surveys before survey research based in probability sampling was invented. These characteristics were already understood to enhance objectivity, but after the association of surveying and probability sampling, they became crucial tools in the project to draw scientific inferences from survey data. They enabled the effort to hold constant as much as possible about the survey interview, so that the claim could be made that any variation researchers identified was attributable to the individuals studied.

To make the inferences drawn from these sampled individuals sensible ones, it was also necessary to assume that the individuals in the underlying population reflected in the sample thought and acted, at least some of the time, the way that surveyed individuals did. It became critical to assume that the standardized experience of the survey interview was like something else and that the way that individuals were in the survey was like the way they were somewhere else.

This understanding of the inferential project of survey analysis was prompted, in particular, by the fact that surveys take the individual record as their analytic unit (Converse 1987, 21). Though the focus on the individual record preceded the development of probability sampling, the individual record took on new meaning in the new inferential project. The individual record may refer to more than one person at a time, as when the record refers to a household. Crucially, survey researchers moved the focus on the individual records to a focus on individual persons—to their thoughts, feelings, and behavior. From data about sampled voters, they made inferences about the votes that would be cast by individual voters on Election Day. Similarly, when market researchers used surveys to gauge consumer preferences and academics became interested, in the postwar era, in questions such as support for civil liberties and tolerance more generally, they adopted a similar perspective. They asked individual consumers and citizens about their preferences and attitudes.7

Surveys, already oriented to an analysis of the individual record, thus became firmly oriented to an analysis of the consumer in the case
of market research and the individual voter/citizen in the case of political research. Surveying’s built-in orientation to the individual record became an orientation toward the analysis of individuals. But surveying’s focus on the individual record does not necessitate the analysis of individuals or their attitudes. This focus coincides neatly with theoretical designs investigating the attitudes of individual citizens. It does not, however, require such a perspective.

Requisite or not, practices oriented to an analysis of individual attitudes are routine today. The assumption that surveys produce data about individuals is completely indoctrinated in the survey research community. Furthermore, this assumption is not regarded as doctrinaire but as simply obvious. A glance at any handbook of survey research shows how fully embedded is this individualist method. For example, explaining the purposes and advantages of survey research, Weisberg, Krosnick, and Bowen (1989, 19) state that “if it is possible to ask people questions, we can gain much information about what they are thinking—and why they do things. When public attitudes and mass behavior are of interest, surveys play important roles in social science.” Survey researchers, with a few exceptions, understand public opinion to be the additive sum of the opinions and attitudes of individuals. They see their analytic task as illuminating the cognitive processes through which those individual opinions are formed and these individual attitudes are drawn forth.

This individualistic self-understanding embodies crucial—indeed, monumental—methodological and political assumptions. Methodologically, as we saw above, making the attitudes and opinions of individual respondents the unit of analysis greatly simplifies the process of drawing inferences from survey data because it excludes from consideration the external contexts that distinguish members of a population from each other or prompt some individuals to consider survey questions differently than other sampled individuals. This assumption enables the claim that surveyed individuals are like other individuals in the underlying population. Though some researchers have ventured to understand the role of social context in shaping opinion, “social experience is enormously diverse” and “the complexity here is daunting” (Kinder 1998, 815).

Politically, the assumption that survey research allows us to describe and analyze the attitudes of individuals is even more consequential. It carries at least two powerful implications. First and foremost, our methodological individualism needs an accompanying political theory. Therefore, we postulate the existence of some
independent, extra-political existential individual, one who, somewhat contradictorily, possesses attitudes about politics. Modern survey researchers are clearly committed to the possibility that there is such a thing as an attitude about politics that is genuinely independent from politics. For example, Narayan and Krosnick (1996, 58) say that it “is well established that people’s reports of their attitudes are influenced by factors in addition to the attitudes themselves.” Ironically, political attitudes are assumed to persist quite apart and at some remove from politics. They are held by this independent, isolated individual outside of, before, or after entering or somewhere other than any political arena. This is a crucial political assumption. It may be descriptive of some kinds of politics—after all, individuals are relatively isolated when voting secret ballots—but it clearly cannot reflect many other kinds of politics. Most crucially, by definition and assumption, it cannot possibly reflect a democratic politics of open public exchange or a deliberative politics in which public opinion is an organic entity created by citizens among each other.

Second and related, to secure their ability to make inferences according to their methodological and political theories, survey researchers seek to measure the attitudes of such individuals apart from immediate political influences, which are understood to distort or bias real attitudes. The existential individual is an abstraction, but survey researchers are interested in the views of real people. To approximate the individual at some abstract remove from politics, researchers try to find respondents at home. Epistemologically, the commitment is to an independent, not currently politicized but nevertheless political individual. Practically, the concern becomes to measure the views of individuals in their private domains.

Not surprisingly, given this private orientation, discussions of interviewing sometimes sound like etiquette texts. Interviewers are reminded of the need to be polite to respondents who have invited them into their homes (Converse and Schuman 1974). Similarly, researchers interpret many of the effects attributable to the particular circumstances under which survey questions are posed as evidence of “social desirability,” where the norms of etiquette are assumed to govern behavior in the interview. Race of interviewer effects in surveys are usually interpreted in this way, as Finkel, Guterbock, and Borg (1991, 315) note: commonly, researchers understand these effects as “‘interpersonal deference,’ ‘courtesy to a polite stranger,’ or more simply a general desire to be agreeable.” Respondents are
interpreted as desiring to be good hosts, and interviewers are urged
to be good guests.
These developments have brought survey research to its funda-
mental modern contradiction. Given the practices of contemporary
survey researchers, which are indeed animated (though not necessi-
tated) by important methodological requirements, public opinion is
generated and measured, literally, in living rooms (or other private
spaces near them). But meanwhile, the justifications for and aspira-
tions of opinion surveying range far beyond the confines of the
domestic realm. Surveyors defend their practice of measuring atti-
tudes figuratively by the invocation of public metaphors. George
Gallup (1939, 15), one of the founders of modern opinion polling,
called polls “sample referenda” and claimed that with the advent of
modern polling, “the New England town meeting has, in a sense,
been restored.” Similarly, in its mission statement, the Roper Center, a
major archive of public opinion surveys, says “public opinion polls let
the people speak for themselves. At its best, polling can amplify the
public’s voice” (http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu).
So the fundamental contradiction of modern public opinion sur-
veying is this: because of the analytic and measurement strategies of
survey researchers, public opinion has become literally private and
only figuratively public. Insofar as possible, actual public, external
influences must not intrude during the process of measuring the per-
sisting political attitudes that individual survey respondents harbor
in the domestic realm. Yet survey researchers still want the domestic
realm to be political. We can see this desire when Gallup (1939, 15)
stated that with the rise of opinion polling, “the nation has become
one great room” or when Sidney Verba (1996, 4) remarks, perhaps
sardonically, that survey researchers use random-digit dialing rather
than phone book listings “to catch those would-be shirkers who get
unlisted numbers so they can avoid their civic obligation to take
phone calls during dinner.”
This desire also animates the assertion by Page and Shapiro (1992,
362) that “collective public opinion does not arise solely through the
action of external stimuli upon atomistic, isolated individuals. Not at
all.” Instead, they claim that polls provide an instrument through
which a broader process of deliberation can take place, where citizens
react to policy and public officials attend to those reactions. Surveys
reflect and contribute to a process of “collective deliberation” consist-
ing of “many specialized elements . . . organized in a complex fashion,
communicating—through a number of direct and indirect
links—with each other and with individual citizens” (Page and Shapiro 1992, 364). Other opinion researchers—for example, Stimson, MacKuen, and Erickson (1995, 562)—have energetically endorsed this view of public opinion as deliberation.

Collective deliberation is, however, only a metaphor for face-to-face exchange. Given the measurement strategies of survey researchers, which aim to capture the opinions of privately situated individuals, survey data cannot represent any actual public engagement. Even the best efforts to resuscitate the lost public by characterizing the processes by which individual citizens collectively react to government, and government attends to their aggregated reactions, as deliberative fail to engage the core criticism of attitudinal survey research—that it situates citizens in isolation from each other.

The choice to regard individual citizens as the unit of analysis carries, we have seen, considerable implications. It ushers in the complaints of democratic critics who lament the loss of the public in opinion research. It permits a disregard of context or circumstances external to the individual—or at least it complicates any attempt to attend to context or external circumstances. More than any other single thing, it is this analytic posture, securely rooted in contemporary opinion research, that fuels democratic criticisms. Yet it is also the case that within surveying, better rejoinders are available.

THE PRAGMATIC AND DEMOCRATIC POTENTIAL OF SURVEYING

Survey research contains democratic possibilities that have been obscured by its dominant orientation toward the individualistic, attitudinal model. Because the decision to make individual attitudes the unit of analysis in survey-based public opinion research was a historically contingent rather than a methodologically necessary development, within survey research there is room for alternative interpretive and analytic postures. In this section, I show that survey researchers already assume them. In particular, I identify two major strains in contemporary survey research that show surveying’s potential to admit the public back into opinion research.

First, contemporary opinion researchers are to some extent moving beyond their metaphorical invocation of collective deliberation to more direct simulations of deliberative processes. Second, opinion researchers are recalling earlier episodes in the history of survey
research and looking at political behavior and public opinion as a product of social and political contexts. At their best, these new analytic postures embody experimental approaches that illuminate counterfactual conditions of interest to democrats and demonstrate how surveys can be employed to analyze political units other than individuals—for example, neighborhoods or conversations. With these developments, the possibilities for studying public opinion as a genuinely public phenomenon, responsive to the structures in which and through which it is produced, come closer.

The clearest and perhaps most well-known attempt to realize deliberation within the context of an opinion poll is “deliberative polling,” the invention of James Fishkin and his colleagues at the University of Texas. It is an attempt to embody and combine with survey research the ideal of face-to-face democracy. Insisting that deliberation means “thinking through the issues together” and that “an intelligent basis for decision making requires a social context,” Fishkin and colleagues ([1995] 1997, 4, 20) bring together individuals selected through a random sample and allow them to discuss issues over some period of time—for instance, over a weekend. To be sure, deliberative polling is easily faulted. Both the representativeness of the deliberative sample and the consequentialness of the change in opinion attributed to deliberation are sometimes overstated. More troubling, the nature of the nature of the deliberative treatment is obscure: how is face-to-face exchange distinct, if at all, from exposure to new information? Still, Fishkin and his associates are making a laudable effort to preserve one of the celebrated strengths of the probability sample survey, its representativeness, while addressing its serious limitation, its restriction to citizens in isolation from each other.

Survey researchers are also engaged in other attempts to simulate deliberative processes within surveys. These attempts have been inspired by the recognition by survey researchers that the immediate circumstances of the survey and the ways that questions are posed to respondents shape how opinion is formed. Respondents offer different opinions depending on the ways questions are worded and where they are placed within surveys (Schuman and Presser 1981). Similarly, the experimental work of Tversky and Kahneman (1982) has solidly demonstrated to survey researchers that individuals’ preferences depend heavily on how problems and options are framed.

Within the strict confines of a true attitudes model, or one that posits that individuals hold consistent and stable views about politics,
these recognitions are troubling. Question wording and ordering effects imply that individuals can be pushed around, that various forces make them veer from the position that they really hold. But increasingly, public opinion researchers have rejected this true attitudes model in favor of models that suggest, in various ways, that at any given instance when individuals are answering survey questions, a variety of influences might contribute to their responses. The weight of these influences depends on their availability to respondents; those that are accessibly at the “top of the head” when survey responses are produced are given more weight (Zaller 1992). The “accessibility” models discussed by political scientists owe much to the work of cognitive psychologists (Tourangeau 1987; Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz 1996). Their basic insight is that individuals think differently, that is, access and bring to bear different “considerations” about an issue, depending on how questions are presented to them.

Moving beyond this, survey researchers now also consider how individuals might both think and behave differently depending on the nature of the social interaction of the survey interview. To varying degrees, scholars who are developing and extending accessibility models emphasize the role of social factors in influencing cognitive, psychological, and behavioral processes. Survey researchers clearly make analytical room for social context when they explicitly recognize that the survey interview is a social setting (Converse and Schuman 1974; Suchman and Jordan 1992; Sudman, Bradburn, and Schwarz 1996; Berinski 1998).

Opinion researchers now regularly employ models admitting a role for both psychological and social contexts as factors influencing how opinion is formed and reported. Thinking of contextual factors as influences on opinion has inspired a variety of research agendas in which survey instrumentation is employed experimentally to represent political processes. Experiments in question wording, for example, have demonstrated that citizens often consider policy debates quite differently, depending on the specific, substantive ingredients of those debates (Kinder and Sanders 1990; Nelson and Kinder 1996; Stoker 1998; Sniderman et al. 1991; Kinder and Palfrey 1993). Citizens are here conceived not as pushed away from their real views by contextual influences but as responding differently—that is, constructing and reporting their opinions differently—depending on the specific arguments and formulations presented to them through the survey instrument or through political discourse.
These developments in survey research embody the kind of experimental investigations a pragmatist such as Dewey would applaud. Because they retain surveying’s ability to generalize to underlying populations, they allow political scientists to make strong claims about how particular formulations of elite debates, for example, produce very different representations of public opinion. When experiments are embedded in surveys, then social science is marshalled to illuminate the empirical conditions of democratic politics by reflecting elite debate directly.

Experimental approaches are not restricted to question-wording experiments investigating the consequences for individual thinking of alternative formulations of elite debate. Experimental approaches may be used to illuminate the conditions under which policies are favored and opposed, as when Sniderman and his colleagues (1991) used the relatively new technology of computer-assisted telephone interviewing to study how policy views changed depending on the race and other characteristics of hypothetical recipients of public benefits. And as Sniderman and colleagues’ employment of hypothetical scenarios in a survey suggests, experimental approaches may illuminate politically counterfactual situations, ones that might be empirically elusive or rare but nevertheless highly valued by democrats. Students of race and social policy, for example, have long been interested in how public support for social welfare policies might grow in the counterfactual condition in which citizens did not believe that beneficiaries of federal programs were disproportionately members of minority groups.

Newer models admit a great degree of contextual influence into the process of attitude formation and construction. This admission enables experimental investigations of how various elements of public discussion differentially influence opinion formulation. Thus, they provide mechanisms through which deliberative processes, including counterfactual ones, may be simulated. Though experimental methods by no means require this, for the most part, the models discussed above remain individual, attitudinal models, seeking to clarify the role of social and other factors on individual processes of opinion construction and expression.

A less prominent, though enduring, strain of research investigates opinion formation outside of the individual. It thus comprehends opinion formation as a more genuinely sociological process. V. O. Key’s (1949) monumental study of Southern politics showed the importance of racial context in determining white hostility and
electoral preferences. In the early decades of survey-based investigations of electoral behavior, Columbia sociologists sought to illuminate the patterns of influence during an election campaign in Elmira, New York (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee 1954). More recently, Huckfeldt and Sprague’s (1995, 25) network analysis sees the electoral choices made by individuals as a social product measured at the level of individual voters: they "attempt to understand the choices of voters within the settings and community where those choices were made." Rather than looking at how external contexts influence the political choices made in private, Huckfeldt and Sprague offer a recent example of a genuinely sociological model of political influence in which political choice is conceived of as a social product.

It is crucial to notice that Huckfeldt and Sprague’s (1995) analysis, like the earlier voting studies by Columbia researchers, employed surveys. The introduction of sociological and political context into models of electoral choice—even the abandonment of the presumption of an individual, attitudinal analysis—does not necessitate the surrender of survey research.

It does, however, necessitate the reconceptualization of what should be represented in surveys. Students of American politics and public opinion tend, as Blumer observed in 1948, to extend models best suited for electoral politics to other domains. The individualistic, attitudinal model, which draws on data collected in living rooms, treats the formation of public opinion as analogous to the vote choices made at polling places on Election Day. The underlying population sampled in public opinion surveys therefore frequently resembles the electorate.

Almost always, the sample in which survey researchers are interested is based in a preexisting body defined by conventional politics. We are particularly interested in national samples, which represent the population of the entire United States taken together. Major opinion surveys such as those conducted by large firms like Gallup or media outlets like the New York Times and ABC News enhance their validity by claiming to represent the nation. The population of the United States, or the nation taken as a whole, is routinely assumed to be the body that should be represented in a survey.

Similarly, we are often interested in representing a state or a metropolitan area; this is more a difference of degree than a difference in kind. Whether a survey employs a national sample or accurately represents the views of people in a state or a region, it also relies on an assumption by analysts that the divisions outlined in our federal
system define the divisions that are of enduring interest to us. These are not always the most appropriate or interesting divisions for researchers interested in democratic politics to attend to.

A reconceptualization of the appropriate unit of analysis for public opinion research invites a reconsideration of the political units surveys represent. Instead of restricting attention to conventional samples, researchers may draw samples from and survey models may represent any political body that the researcher is capable of imagining and defining. Any decision about how to sample always depends on a prior about the population of interest. Typically, surveyors studying public opinion have stayed within the confines of conventional federal units and electoral politics. But there is no reason that they’ve had to: there are no formal limits on how these populations should be defined. Researchers could define populations of interest to include counterfactuals, populations we do not encounter in our ordinary political experience but ones that are imaginable and politically relevant to us.

In the domain of racial politics, for example, researchers are clearly concerned to illuminate the possibilities of achieving a racially integrated, democratic polity. Along these lines, we might be interested in comparing the public opinion produced in racially integrated, compared to racially segregated, conditions. One approach would be to produce a large enough sample of individuals who live in both racially segregated and integrated areas to reliably draw statistical inferences about what individual political opinions might look like if the nation were racially integrated. This could be accomplished by measuring both individual- and contextual-level factors, by both asking people about their policy views and gathering data about their neighborhoods or census tracts. Such an approach enables a consideration of opinion in a public or political context (Bobo and Gilliam 1990; Kinder and Mendelberg 1995; Huckfeldt and Kohfeldt 1989). Though researchers employing these methods see themselves as studying individual attitudes, their methods are consistent with alternative interpretations of what might be represented in survey data. With appropriate adjustments in sampling, their units of analysis might become neighborhood opinion.

Alternatively, one might model racial context more abstractly by conceiving of the product of the dyadic interview, rather than the attitudes of the individual respondent, as the unit of survey analysis. Survey interviews always carry a racial context by virtue of the fact that interviewers and respondents are always racially identified in the
United States. Analysis of the effect of this racial context on opinion is readily available on the rare occasions when interviewers of different races are randomly assigned to survey respondents, rather than matched according to race. One advantage of this model of racial context is its higher internal validity: through random assignment of interviewers, racial context is randomly assigned to survey respondents, enabling the researcher to draw strong conclusions about the affect of racial context on the generation of opinion.

Furthermore, when the interview, rather than the individual respondent, is considered the unit of analysis in survey research, then survey data are reconceived as a product of public exchange. Interview data are still organized according to individual records, but each individual record is understood to represent the product of exchange between two racially identified individuals (Sanders 1999).

Employing such an analytic strategy, I have elsewhere demonstrated that the public opinion produced in racially segregated contexts differs substantially from the opinion produced in integrated contexts. In particular, integrated interviews produce perspectives on affirmative action that depend crucially on assessments of the economic conditions faced by black Americans. This assessment is irrelevant to affirmative action opinion when it is generated in racially segregated, exclusively white, interview contexts (Sanders 1996). Though these findings may be interpreted as illuminating individual-level, ultimately psychological processes, they may also be viewed as representing the products of discussion or exchange under both segregated and integrated conditions. Variation in the racial pairing contained in the individual interview record facilitates this comparison, and it helps make explicit how structural conditions such as racial integration and segregation produce publics with different opinions.

This is a relatively unconventional interpretation, but it is readily available within the rubric of conventional survey research. It depends on the power to make inferences to underlying populations that random sampling, as well as random assignment of interviewers to respondents, allows. Where it departs from convention is in their understanding of what is represented in the individual survey record and, correspondingly, what underlying population is represented in the survey sample made up of these records. Rather than interpreting survey data as a more or less accurate report of the opinions individuals formulate in a private situation as possible, it reinterprets survey data as a product of an interview that more or less accurately
reflects other social and political contexts. It presumes that the dyadic interview situation resembles a broader public exchange between two or more persons.

Racial attitudes research belies a concern to see how white individuals “really” think about blacks, which is generally understood to mean how they think in private. In turn, when citizens of any race are studied, segregated contexts are often understood to be more private than integrated ones. A solid, empirically based rationale is of course available for this identification of reality, privacy, and racial segregation: the United States is a deeply and persistently segregated nation.

Yet it is also the case that a segregated nation is seldom openly endorsed as a political aspiration by anyone and is never endorsed by democratic theorists and the public opinion researchers who share their goals and justify their investigations in the terms they supply. Rather, goals such as color-blindness or multicultural harmony are celebrated. Surely, in pursuit of such goals, survey researchers should be curious about how opinion is produced not only in segregated conditions but also in integrated ones. And, to the degree that we conceive of public opinion as something that is generated between people, we should study how people develop and state their views outside of their private domains. Conceiving of opinion as the product of the racial context of the survey interview encourages such an investigation, while the individualistic, attitudinal model hinders it.

If we use surveys to illuminate the counterfactual condition of integrated political discussion, we of course cannot justify our project in terms of its descriptive representativeness. We do, however, retain the power to make inferences to underlying populations. When we investigate the public opinion of a racially integrated polity, we are in effect representing an imaginary community. Nevertheless, it is a community of interest to democratic theorists and survey researchers.

Of course, there are analytical and political limits on the researcher’s imagination. Not just anything goes, and I’m not saying that survey researchers should free themselves to sample any wackily defined population that strikes their fancy. A case must be made on behalf of each sampling decision, as a case is easily made for investigating public opinion under conditions of racial integration. Some cases will be harder to make than others. It is up to researchers or analysts to mount a defense of their sampling decisions, rather than reflexively producing national samples and endorsing them as descriptively representative.11
These considerations are important because some processes of interest to analysts of politics are probably not best investigated via the study of a national or other conventionally defined sample. In particular, democratic deliberation, understood as the public, open process of discussing policy and political questions, may arguably be better understood via the construction of samples from unconventionally defined populations. We may want to know, for example, how public opinion on health care or AIDS funding might develop differently if racial minorities, women, or gay people were overrepresented in decision-making bodies relative to their numbers in the national population. We may be interested in how people think differently about policy questions when they are posed by people very unlike themselves. These sorts of questions are central in any examination that conceives of public opinion as the product of deliberation.

If we agree with Habermas and other democratic theorists that genuine democratic discussion, as well as real public opinion, arises only in public circumstances, surely we will want to know how factors such as racial inequality structure public settings. In the example from my own work offered above, I employed survey research to investigate how American thinking about race is different when surveys do not reflect and reinforce the structures of white dominance by routinely investigating, and privileging as more real, opinion generated in racially segregated circumstances. How public expression changes under circumstances representing different racial arrangements is the question of interest. Public expression is treated as interesting in its own right because public opinion must be treated, at least some of the time, as a product of public life.

There are many ways that deliberative processes might be investigated: small group studies, for example. Yet conducting these investigations via surveys, especially ones that embed experimental treatments, offers important opportunities to combine external and internal validity. Unlike laboratory experiments, surveys enable strong claims about how well study findings apply to populations of interest. Unlike deliberative polling or most research based in focus groups, experimental treatments embedded within surveys permit researchers to make strong and specific claims about how different information, different formulations of arguments, and different social contexts produce different kinds of public opinion.

To be sure, survey interviews are to some degree imposed on respondents. But this imposition is not so different from the impositions that any political participation implies, except for the fact that
the particular impositions of surveys and social science might reflect structural and political patterns whose consequences may be investigated. Letting individual respondents set the agenda for a survey interview or, for that matter, a focus group may make the experience of participation in a social scientific study somehow less imposing. Such attempts to “empower” respondents may produce higher comfort levels for both the particular individual researchers and respondents who participate in a given study. But these attempts also damage the effort to make generalizations from surveys (as they do from focus groups). This damage is consequential for democrats, who are deprived of the opportunity of drawing conclusions about the consequences of particular structures for democratic discussion and public opinion. The artifice of surveys is a boon, not a worry, to researchers investigating democratic politics.

CONCLUSION

Democratic politics is distinguished from other forms of government by its public character. If democracy is government by discussion, then it is also government by talk out in the open. Citizens are democrats when they act for and before each other, when they understand themselves to be engaged in activities that have consequences for themselves and for similarly situated others. This self-consciousness may be present in politics that are not democratic, but it is a crucial dimension of democratic politics.

On this definition of democratic politics, it is clear why it is so essential to explore alternatives to the individualistic, attitudinal, privatized conception of public opinion evident in survey research. If the demonstrable admission by contemporary survey researchers of a role for social factors in influencing opinion belies the claim that researchers conceive of individuals in isolation, it is still indisputably the case that most survey researchers privilege the private. No wonder critics are inclined to dismiss survey research as not really about public opinion and to worry about the democratic implications of surveying’s dominance.

Yet dismissing surveys out of hand is stupendously unpragmatic. Not only are surveys part of the American repertoire of public expression and an entrenched institution in our polity. Surveying, because of its power to make inferences through sampling to underlying populations and communities—including unconventional or
imaginary ones—provides unprecedented opportunities to make claims about the nature of public opinion in these populations and communities. This kind of analytical purchase on the empirical conditions of political life is something both pragmatists and democrats should embrace. Dewey ([1927] 1997) admitted a large role for social science in inquiries about democratic politics. Social science marshalled to questions about structural arrangements was, for him, an essential tool in the democratic project to investigate political and economic reality.12

But to exploit the democratic and pragmatic possibilities of survey research, survey researchers must imagine alternatives to the privatized, individualistic, attitudinal conception of public opinion endemic to survey research. Luckily, these possibilities are not so remote; they are already embodied to some degree in the work of contemporary survey researchers. I have outlined two ways that survey research is moving beyond the private conception. First, in various ways, researchers are attempting to model deliberative processes directly. Second, they are focusing on external, contextual influences of public opinion in a way that enables the consideration of alternatives to the individual as the unit of analysis in survey research. Both of these developments point to mechanisms through which surveys can go beyond describing the status quo. Both in various ways enable the investigation of counterfactual conditions and therefore are in keeping with the aspiration of free experimental social inquiry. Both, finally, in different ways address the central concern to conceive of public opinion as a public, deliberative process.

The challenge for survey researchers is to be specific about the validity for their inquiries of the probability samples they collect and to consider in a more sustained way exactly what kind of opinion is represented in survey data. When researchers randomly select privately situated individuals at home and then try unobtrusively to get them to offer their real opinions, they are already studying them in a context: that of private life. Thus, the generalization from data produced under these conditions to public life is legitimately suspect. Yet survey research’s focus on the individual record does not necessitate attitudinal models: individual records can be produced about citizens in contexts. Granted, such an endeavor is more complicated than attitudinal studies, and easy generalizations about the representativeness of such samples cannot be made. But democratic, innovative, and experimental inquiries, ones that continue to feature the inferential strengths of modern social science, can. Such inquiries offer the richer
conception of public opinion that both democratic critics and survey researchers clearly want.

NOTES

1. My analysis accepts to some degree the identification of survey research and public opinion. Both critics and practitioners of survey research tend to treat survey research and public opinion as coextensive. That is, they either complain about or accept an operational definition of public opinion. Herbert Blumer ([1948] 1986, 197) derided an "operationalist position" in which "public opinion consists of what public opinion polls poll," while John Zaller (1992, 4), author of the most important book published in the past decade on public opinion, defines his project as "understanding the dynamics of public opinion on major issues, as public opinion on major issues is typically measured."

To embrace a pragmatic analysis is also, in my view, to side with Zaller rather than Blumer by accepting, at least to some degree, the operationalist view. Public opinion is defined to some extent by the way that it is studied and measured now, which is largely through surveys. Still, even within the bounds of this acceptance, survey research can admit a richer conception of public opinion than it has to date.

2. Though note that precisely the same is true for juries. You can’t volunteer to serve on one. Still, juries are often regarded as genuine expressions of the voice of the people.

3. In a critical departure from decades of survey research on public opinion, according to this new perspective in the survey research community, people do not possess true attitudes or necessarily persistent opinions. As John Zaller (1992, 35) explains, "In the last fifteen years, survey methodologists and social psychologists have … tended to abandon the conventional notion that people possess fixed opinions that they simply reveal in surveys, and have begun to concentrate instead on the 'question-answering process' by which individuals construct opinion reports in response to the particular stimulus that confronts them." It will become clearer below that my arguments here are in keeping with, and derive crucially from, this important new perspective in survey research. Yet according to this new view, the construction of opinions remains an individual-level phenomenon, one that may be socially influenced but is not in and of itself regarded as a distinctly political process.

4. Though he criticizes attitudinal conceptualizations, Habermas ([1962] 1993) indeed does not entirely rule out opinion surveys as potential contributions to democratic politics. Surveying might precede or follow reflective, visible deliberation and be incorporated as a critical component of it.

5. In this section, I depend heavily on Jean Converse’s (1987) masterful history of survey research.

6. Huckfeldt and Sprague (1995, 8) refer to the dominance of an individualistic, social-psychological model in studies of electoral politics specifically. They insist on a contrast between the "real" electorate composed of "interrelated, interacting, interdependent citizens" and the mythical "artificially constructed electorate" of "independent, isolated, atomized individuals" animating the bulk of postwar political research. As Blumer ([1948] 1986) suggested, however, this electoral model has greatly influenced the study of politics and public opinion more broadly (see especially p. 205).
7. Attitudinal research preceded the development of probability sampling. Jean Converse (1987, 26-27) identifies the Country Life Study (c. 1908) as “the first quality-of-life study done with individual subjective indicators—or at least the first study of this magnitude.” Thomas and Znaniecki’s (1927) monumental study of Polish peasants was also an attitudinal study. My point here is that with the introduction of probability sampling, a focus on individuals and subsequently their attitudes assumed unprecedented importance because it simplified problems of measurement and inference.

8. The best example of the perspective linking privacy and reality is the study of white racial attitudes in which researchers are especially interested in describing the extent to which whites persist in racism and whether blacks have valid reasons for skepticism about racial progress. This question has inspired a number of attempts to measure racial attitudes unobtrusively (Kinder and Sears 1981; McConahay 1986; Kuklinski et al. 1997; Hurley 1997). The real attitude is the one that emerges in as private a circumstance as possible. Many students of race of interviewer effects in surveys depend on claims that some attitudes are more real than others. They postulate the existence of attitudes that may be reported in surveys more or less accurately and reflect a concern that “under some circumstances the respondent may not faithfully reveal their private judgment to the survey researcher” (Berinski 1998). One theorist of public opinion who is not a survey researcher, Timur Kuran (1995), nevertheless exemplifies the view that real political views, including views about racial policy, are harbored in private.

9. Even if the analogy is plausible, note that where people vote—the polling place—is clearly distinct from and clearly more public than the domestic site where survey interviews are conducted. The defensibility of interviewing people at home on the grounds that they are thinking there as they think somewhere else is enhanced as absentee ballots—presumably cast at home—are increasingly used.

10. A frequent response to this argument is the suggestion that views on race policy and other controversial questions might be best solicited as unobtrusively or as invisibly as possible, for instance, by impersonal surveying techniques. Paper and pencil or computers provide mechanisms by which survey respondents might retain privacy and comfort and therefore reveal their real views. But as my language already suggests, such a suggestion already accepts precisely the position I dispute: that public opinion should be measured under conditions that are as private as possible. Whenever we move to the idea that social or political forces bias reports of some real, previously constructed opinion, we are abstracting public opinion from the conditions of public life.

11. I do not mean to suggest that survey researchers never study specialized samples. To the contrary, they often do; see, for example, Jennings and Anderson (1996). But I do mean to call into question the automatic claim that national samples are always suitable for investigations of public opinion, no matter what the specific questions at issue in those investigations are.

12. In decrying a political science occupied with abstract concepts, Dewey ([1927] 1997, 193) complained that “the ‘problem’ of the relation of the concept of authority to that of freedom, of personal rights to social obligations, with only a presumptive illustrative reference to empirical facts, has been substituted for inquiry into the consequences of some particular distribution, under given conditions, of specific freedoms and authorities, and for inquiry into what altered distribution would yield more desirable consequences.”
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Lynn M. Sanders is the Robert Wood Johnson scholar in health policy research at the University of California, Berkeley. She is on leave from the University of Chicago, where she has been assistant professor of political science. Her current research is on the relationship between race, political efficacy, and mental health. Other research interests cover topics in public opinion, race, gender, and democratic theory.