Changes in Americans’ Policy Preferences, 1935–1979

BENJAMIN I. PAGE AND ROBERT Y. SHAPIRO

How have the policy preferences of Americans changed over the last four or five decades? This question has two distinct facets we wish to address: (1) what substantive changes there have been, and (2) whether there have been gradual movements, sharp breaks or fluctuations, or general stability. In addition, we are concerned with whether the nature of change has varied across types of issues.

1 As economist friends have pointed out, we are using the term “preferences” differently from the way they do, to refer to (verbal) choices, which may reflect changes in prices or other external circumstances rather than underlying needs or wants.

Abstract Using responses to 3,315 survey questions asked of national samples, we examine how policy preferences of Americans have changed over the last 45 years. The data indicate that there has been considerable stability in public opinion: responses to half the 613 repeated policy items show no significant change at all; approximately half the detectable changes were less than 10 percentage points; and rarely did preferences fluctuate significantly back and forth within a short time period. Foreign policy changes were no larger or more frequent than domestic, but they did tend to occur more abruptly. When opinion shifts occurred, they were not random or capricious; they were usually related to important changes in citizens’ social and economic environments. Rapid shifts generally coincided with major events in international affairs or the economy.

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In the literature of public opinion, some scholars have maintained that opinions are highly labile, especially concerning foreign policy matters (Almond, 1950; but cf. Caspary, 1970). Such a view seems consistent with the notion that the average person is uninterested in politics, unaware of what is going on, and subject to influence by a host of arbitrary forces. Others have suggested that although the opinions of individuals may be volatile (Converse, 1964), the aggregate distributions of preferences are generally quite stable and change slowly (Key, 1961; Erikson and Luttbeg, 1973; Monroe, 1975; Erikson et al., 1980).

Generalization has been hampered, however, by reliance on fragmentary or unsatisfactory data. Journalistic accounts have often stressed the instability of public opinion while reporting sudden jumps in the president's popularity rating or wild fluctuations in preelection polls. But these data do not gauge changes in polity preferences; the stimuli are not fixed policy alternatives but rather ever-changing politicians about whose latest words and actions new information is constantly available. When policy preferences are actually discussed, alleged fluctuations often represent only sampling error, or are artifacts of variations in question wording, sample design, or the research procedures followed by different polling organizations (see Lipset, 1976). The comparison of responses to even slightly different questions is hazardous; yet scholars have not generally had access to any comprehensive collection of responses to identical policy preference questions, asked repeatedly over time by the same survey organizations (see Cantril, 1951; Hastings and Southwick, 1975; Smith, 1980; Miller et al., 1980, for helpful but limited collections).

Data

In connection with a study of dynamic relationships between public opinion and public policy in the United States (see Page and Shapiro, 1980), we have assembled an unusually large collection of data on Americans’ policy preferences. In fact, we are attempting to collect the marginal frequencies of responses to all policy questions that have been asked of national samples by reputable survey organizations, in order to find every item that has been repeated with identical wording and to appraise how (if at all) responses have changed. In this paper we report results from a preliminary collection of 3,315 different policy items fielded during the period 1935–1979 by three organi-

\footnote{For example, Buckley’s (1979) comment alludes especially to Gallup and Harris presidential performance ratings. Roll and Cantril (1972:51) suggest that primary election polls are particularly labile, because voters are not guided by party loyalties.}
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cial), analyzing outcomes) sive activity the of items-318
case,4
defined opinion.
These 613 policy questions provide a substantial data base for analyzing change. To our knowledge they constitute the most extensive collection of opinion trends yet assembled; 327 (53 percent) of the questions concern domestic matters and 286 (47 percent) deal with foreign affairs or national defense. They address all types of policy activity (government spending, laws, regulations, actions of officials, outcomes) by all branches of government (executive, legislative, judicial), in a wide variety of policy areas.

Findings: The Extent of Change

The first question of interest is just how much change and how much stability are found in the data. To us, the striking finding is one of stability in Americans’ policy preferences. We used the modest standard of a 6 percentage point shift in responses to constitute a significant change (a criterion corresponding to statistical significance at better than the .05 confidence level for multistage cluster samples of 1,500, with a 50–50 percent split in opinion), and also required that the level of change not depend on how “don’t know” or “no opinion” responses were treated.4 Even by this rather generous measure, fully half of our repeated items—318 of the 613, or 52 percent—showed no significant change at all.

Moreover, most of the 355 changes that did occur (in the responses

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3 We expect eventually to find more than 10,000 policy items, including perhaps 1,500 repeated questions. We would be most grateful for suggestions of sources we may have missed; please write to the authors at the National Opinion Research Center, 6030 South Ellis Avenue, Chicago, Illinois 60637; or telephone (area 312) 753–1300.

4 We defined an instance of opinion change as a shift in response frequencies of 6 percentage points or more between two repetitions (not necessarily adjacent) of a survey question, in which there is no significant (6 percent or more) intervening change in the opposite direction. To determine the size of each opinion change, we dichotomized the response categories in various ways to find the largest shift that occurred. For each case in which we obtained different estimates when we included or excluded the “don’t know” or “no opinion” responses, we selected the smaller change. When questions contained three or more ordinal categories, our dichotomizing procedure in effect required that the balance of opinion change, that is, that opinion not merely polarize, with the extreme response categories changing in the same direction. We also raised the criterion to more than 6 percentage points for questions asked of small samples; to determine the amount of change required, we multiplied the standard errors for these small samples by 1.64, the adjustment factor that produces the 6 percentage points standard for samples of 1,500.
to the 295 questions showing one or more changes) were rather small. Approximately half of them (161, or 45 percent) were less than 10 percentage points. Most of those involved preference changes of 7 or 8 percentage points—statistically significant but hardly earth-shaking.

Contrary to what one might expect, foreign policy items did not differ much from domestic in either the proportion or the magnitude of significant changes. As can be seen in Tables 1 and 2, approximately half the items in each policy area showed change, and only a few more than half the changes in each area amounted to 10 percentage points or more. (It would be misleading, however, to conclude that foreign and domestic changes took exactly the same form. As we shall see, changes in foreign policy opinion tended to be more abrupt.)

Examining more specific types of policy, we did observe some differences in the magnitude of change. Americans' preferences concerning civil liberties, abortion, Nixon and Watergate, and U.S.–China relations tended to change more than others, whereas on the average, preferences about social welfare policies and gun control changed less.

Although we have emphasized the stability of preferences, we also found some noteworthy instances of change. In fact, we found 42 cases (12 percent of the total) with changes of 20 percentage points or more. And 14 of these (to be sure, only 4 percent of all the cases of change) were of 30 points or more. In domestic affairs, for example, there were large increases in tolerance toward communists, socialists, and atheists. Opinion became much more favorable toward abortion, interracial marriage, desegregation of housing, and (by a hefty 38 percent) desegregation of schools; it moved heavily against

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<tr>
<th>Table 1. Significant Changes in Repeated Policy Questions</th>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic policy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foreign policy*</td>
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<td>Total items</td>
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Gamma = Q = .06 (n.s.).

* Includes questions concerned with national defense.

5 We compared the shifts in preferences for 27 types of policy issues: civil liberties, civil rights, social-style issues, abortion, crime, gun control, education, social welfare, labor, big government, political reform, Nixon-Watergate, economic issues, international organizations, Russia, World War II, Korean War, Vietnam, draft, China, foreign aid, world communism, national defense, Middle East, domestic not elsewhere classified (n.e.c.), foreign n.e.c., domestic-foreign n.e.c. On the average, each type included 13 instances of change.

6 We will hereafter often use shorthand expressions like "38 percent" for the awkward "38 percentage points."
Table 2. The Magnitudes of Significant Changes in Preferences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>6−7%</th>
<th>8−9%</th>
<th>10−14%</th>
<th>15−19%</th>
<th>20−29%</th>
<th>30%+</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Domestic policy</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>(48)</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>(35)</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>(58)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign policy</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>(34)</td>
<td>26%</td>
<td>(44)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>(50)</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>(79)</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>(44)</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>(28)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>(82)</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>(79)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>(108)</td>
<td>12%</td>
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Gamma = .02 (n.s.).

Percentages reported do not sum to 100% due to rounding.

(and later, for) capital punishment. Large numbers of Americans turned toward favoring greater strictness by criminal courts, and during the unraveling of the Watergate scandal there was a strong swing toward favoring the impeachment of President Nixon. There were also a few big changes of a less familiar sort. These included a 28 percent drop in support for the idea of national identification cards between wartime 1942 and libertarian 1977, and a steep (35 percent) increase between 1949 and 1974 in approval for employing epileptics.7

In foreign policy, there have been substantial changes in preferences about defense spending, the size of the army and navy, the stationing of troops abroad, and the giving of military aid. Feelings about post-war policy toward Germany became markedly more harsh during the course of World War II; attitudes toward Russia and China mellowed in the 1950s; there were increased desires for deescalation as the wars in Korea and Vietnam wore on; and the Salt II treaty lost a lot of its support. By far the largest change in foreign policy preferences was a drop of 37 percent in support for the idea of requiring a popular referendum before declaring war, from isolationist 1935 to nuclear-era 1973.

We classified our instances of opinion change according to whether they were gradual, abrupt, or fluctuating. We called a change abrupt if it occurred at a rate of 10 percentage points or more per year. This criterion, of course, represents an arbitrary cutoff point in the continuous rate-of-change measure which we computed: it is as reasonable as any such dichotomy and includes as abrupt any significant (6 percent) changes that occurred within approximately seven months, along with bigger shifts that occurred more slowly. A fluctuation, in contrast, is defined by the number of reversals in direction of significant change within a given time interval. We took two or more

7 And presumably people with other disabilities as well. Although the questions concerning epileptics and national identification cards were asked in surveys which did not use strictly identical procedures, we are confident that the changes described are real.
significant changes in opposite directions within two years, or three or more within four years as constituting a fluctuation. A fluctuation, of course, might or might not include some abrupt changes. We strictly required that fluctuations be based on statistically significant changes in order to avoid giving false substantive interpretations to sampling error. Gradual changes, then, are shifts in opinion that are neither abrupt nor part of a fluctuation.

**Gradual Shifts in Preferences**

Many of the changes in policy preferences we found involved gradual trends, often with a strong linear component. We graphed each of the 355 instances of change. One hundred and seventy came from 119 questions with sufficient time points to detect fluctuations. Among those 170 we observed 77 cases (45 percent) with fairly smooth shifts. Seldom did the opinion points fall neatly in a straight line, but often they moved in the same direction for sustained periods. In most cases the survey responses were highly autocorrelated; each observation could be predicted fairly well by the previous observation.

Some of these cases of gradual change, particularly those monitored by the NORC General Social Survey, have been reported in the literature. Although there are years missing in some of these time series, the trends are compelling. On civil liberties, for example, as measured by nine different questions about speeches, books, and teaching by communists, socialists, and atheists, Americans' attitudes became much more tolerant (by approximately 30 percent between 1954 and 1972 (see Stouffer, 1955; Davis, 1975), and then leveled off.

The public also became more favorable toward the availability of birth control information. Similarly, five items gauging attitudes toward abortion under various circumstances (birth defects, rape, poverty, unmarried mother, no desire for more children) showed 27–32 percent increases in approval between 1965 and the mid-1970s, with some dropoff occurring thereafter (see Blake, 1971; Taylor, 1978).

Civil rights attitudes liberalized greatly from the mid-1950s through the early 1970s. There was a 38 percent increase (the largest change in our data) from 1956 to 1974 in responses that children of both races should attend the same schools. From 1968 to 1972, 20 percent more disagreed with the idea that whites had the right to keep blacks out of their neighborhoods, and during the period 1963 to 1977 there was a 33 percent increase in opposition to laws forbidding interracial marriage. This trend in favor of civil rights for blacks, however, leveled
off or reversed slightly by the mid-1970s (see Schwartz, 1967; Greeley and Sheatsley, 1971; Taylor et al., 1978; Taylor, 1979; McNichol, 1980).

The legalization of marijuana had been raised as a political issue by the late 1960s. The 17 percent decrease in the public's opposition to legalization between 1969 and 1977 (Gallup), and 15 percent from 1973 to 1978 (NORC), represented more liberal positions on new social or lifestyle issues.

This general liberalization of social attitudes extended also to capital punishment: opposition rose 20 percent between 1953 and 1966. But as fear of crime grew in the late 1960s, support for capital punishment rose again by 23 percent between 1966 and 1976, and opposition to the rights of the accused increased 11 percent from 1974 to 1979. Preferences for harsher treatment of criminals by courts rose 26 percent from 1965 to 1969 (Gallup) and 15 percent during the period 1972 to 1978 (NORC; see Stinchcombe et al., 1980).

There are historical reasons to suppose that Americans' attitudes toward federal government social welfare programs underwent considerable change during the New Deal of the 1930s (see Shiltz, 1970; Cook, 1979), but this has not been tracked by repeated survey questions. From the responses to individual survey items asked at various times since 1935 (mostly by Gallup) we have found support for such programs as Medicare and medical aid for the poor; the creation of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare; unemployment compensation; old age pensions and Social Security; antipoverty programs; food stamps; slum clearance and low-income housing; special assistance for mothers; and federal aid to education. But the repeated items show recent changes in a conservative direction concerning government spending on social welfare, health, the cities, and drug addiction, and concerning government provision of both jobs and a decent standard of living (see Davis, 1980; Smith, 1982).

Contrary to assertions about a confused or vacillating citizenry, these gradual changes in opinions are understandable in terms of underlying secular changes. Americans became more willing to allow communists and socialists to retain basic civil liberties, as there came to be less reason to fear subversive activity. In addition, demographic changes, particularly the maturing of new and better-educated cohorts, contributed to greater social and political tolerance (see Stouffer, 1955; Davis, 1975, 1980; Taylor, 1978). In the area of civil rights, there was increased awareness of racial segregation and its consequences, and less belief that blacks were inferior. The civil rights movement undoubtedly contributed to consciousness raising, and Supreme Court action was a reflection of the change in the
national mood—if not a cause then a consequence of it (see Taylor, 1978). And in the case of abortion, technology had improved the safety of the procedure, while rubella, thalidomide, and other sources of birth defects made the public reconsider the complexities of the abortion question. In addition, unplanned pregnancy became more problematic for the increasing numbers of women who were working (see Karplus, 1980).8

Our illustrations of gradual change have thus far all concerned domestic policy. This is no accident, for gradual shifts are more prevalent in domestic than in foreign policy areas. In fact, as shown in Table 3, among survey items asked frequently enough to allow us to observe fluctuation, 64 percent of domestic but only 28 percent of foreign policy changes were gradual.

There were, however, also some cases of gradual change in foreign policy preferences. Americans’ desires for the United States to take an active part in foreign affairs rose rather steadily (by 13 percent) between 1947 and 1965, presumably reflecting new U.S. power and responsibility; then, with the discouraging Vietnam experience, they dropped 18 percent by 1975, according to NORC surveys. Similar items fielded by Gallup showed a rise in activism from 1945 through 1946 and a fairly level response up to 1950 (see Caspary, 1970). Still another question, asked by SRC/CPS, revealed steady opposition to isolationism at the 75-80 percent level in 1968 and 1972, with a small drop occurring by 1976.

Support for military aid to U.S. allies rose slowly between 1951 and 1953 and then declined to the 1951 level by 1956. Between the Korean War year 1952 and more peaceful 1957, preferences moved strongly (by 26 percent) toward economic rather than military aid as being more important. Sentiment that there was “too much” spending on foreign aid stayed steady at a high (74–79 percent) level from 1973 to 1976, and then dropped a bit by 1978.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 3. Gradual Changes in Policy Preferences</th>
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<tr>
<td>Domestic policy</td>
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<td>Total changes</td>
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Gamma = Q = .65.

8 From 1938 to 1975 there was also a remarkable 48 percent increase in public approval of a woman working “if she has a husband capable of supporting her” (Gallup). Although we did not consider this a policy question, it was the most impressive attitude change that we encountered.
From 1948 through 1951 there was a decline in support for giving the United Nations power to call up American and other troops, no doubt related to dissatisfaction with the UN “police action” in Korea. Desires for continuing United States membership in the UN stayed steadily near 80 percent with some small ups and downs, including a post-Korea rise in the years 1951–1955; they dropped gradually during the 1965–1976 reaction against Vietnam but rebounded by 1978, according to NORC surveys. Gallup polls showed the same trends: increased opposition to giving up UN membership between 1951 and 1962, but then a decline through 1975.

More Americans favored trade with Japan between 1946 and 1951, continuing to 1955, as war memories faded and a new alliance was formed. Similarly, opposition to Chinese membership in the UN gradually dropped by 15 percent from 1954 to 1958, and by a solid 33 percent between 1964 and 1971 as the Korean hostilities became distant, and talk of a Sino-Soviet split and of China’s improving relations with the West replaced the image of monolithic world communism. And as the Cold War eased during the 1950s, the preferences for continuing diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union rose gradually by 12 percent; desire for trade with Russia also moved up between 1957 and 1959 and then held steady to 1963.

One of the strongest gradual shifts concerned defense spending. According to a number of Gallup surveys between 1969 and 1977, as the Vietnam War wound down and alarms were sounded about increasing Soviet military strength, feelings that we were spending too much on defense steadily fell a total of 29 percent. NORC surveys between 1973 and 1978 also showed a 16 percent rise in those thinking too little was spent. Similarly, the opinion that too much was being spent on space exploration declined by 13 percent between 1973 and 1978.

**Fluctuations**

There have been a number of shifts in policy preferences that were not gradual. For the most part they were not fluctuating, however. Of the 119 survey questions asked frequently enough to detect fluctuations, the responses to 56 (47 percent) changed gradually while 63 (53 percent) shifted abruptly. We found only 19 items (16 percent) with fluctuation. (All, as it happens, were among the 63 questions showing abrupt change.) The data provide little evidence, therefore, that public preferences are capricious, or vacillate wildly. Although there may be too few cases to be certain, we did not find significantly different numbers of fluctuating opinions for foreign versus domestic issues, either.
Even the few fluctuations we observed did not necessarily represent unpredictable or irrational shifts in policy preferences. Some appear to be artifacts of question wording. Three of the domestic policy questions—whether taxes were too high, whether President Kennedy's policies should move to the left, whether President Johnson was pushing racial integration too fast—referred to current government activity at the moment of the interview, which could be quite different at different interviewing dates. The same applied to three foreign policy items asking whether the United States had gone too far concerning world affairs, whether people were making too many sacrifices for national defense, and whether the United States should be firmer with Russia. Changes in these responses somewhat resemble the public's volatile impressions of political figures or of the president's performance, where evaluations of personal qualities or actions change as new information about them is received. Here, too, the survey questions use shifting referents. Responses vary as the stimuli themselves change, even if underlying policy preferences remain constant.

In other cases of fluctuation, where policy preferences do actually change, it would still be wrong to assume that rapid shifts are random or irrational merely because they reverse direction. They may be reasonable responses to changing circumstances, as we shall see in examining the abrupt changes in opinion (including fluctuations) that have occurred during the last 45 years.

**Abrupt Changes in Preferences**

We found quite a few cases in which Americans' policy preferences changed abruptly, at the rate of at least 10 percentage points per year. Of our 355 instances of change 137 (39 percent) were abrupt.\(^9\) This is not an enormous number, particularly out of the 613 repeated policy items in our data set. Still, the rapidity of change in some cases is quite striking, especially concerning foreign policy matters.

The mean rate of change for all our foreign policy instances of change was 28 percentage points per year, compared to 7 percent for domestic cases (medians of 11 percent and 3 percent, respectively)—four times as rapid.\(^10\) Table 4 shows that 58 percent of

\(^9\) For this purpose (in contrast to the analysis of fluctuations) we can use the full set of instances of change, including some based on only two time points.

\(^10\) Our measure of rate of change is simply the number of percentage points in an instance of change divided by the number of years (or fraction of a year) within which it takes place. This generally gives a higher estimate, if there are more than two data points, than the regression of opinion on a time variable, e.g., in Schwartz (1967), Taylor (1980), or Smith (1982).
the changes on foreign policy, but only 21 percent of domestic, met our 10 percent per year criterion for abrupt change.

One complication in making this comparison is that survey organizations have tended to repeat foreign policy questions at shorter time intervals than domestic, an average of 4.6 times per year versus 1.5. The high rate of change we found for foreign policy opinions could conceivably be an artifact of this, because abrupt changes are more likely to be detected when questions are asked frequently. Comparing domestic and foreign policy questions asked equally often, however, we still found more rapid changes in responses to the latter, particularly among questions asked several times per year. Survey organizations may well choose to ask questions about foreign affairs more often, precisely because they expect shifting responses to these items; thus the frequency of questions results from abruptness of change, rather than artificially creating it.

It should not be inferred that the many abrupt changes in foreign policy attitudes represent capricious shifts in the public "mood" (Almond, 1950). On the contrary, virtually all the rapid shifts we found were related to political and economic circumstances or to significant events which sensible citizens would take into account. In particular, most abrupt foreign policy opinion changes took place in connection with wars, confrontations, or crises in which major changes in the actions of the United States or other nations quite naturally affected preferences about what policies to pursue.

Virtually all the shifts we observed in preferences concerning World War II were abrupt ones. Prior to America's entry into the war, support increased sharply for building a larger navy (late 1938) and for military and economic aid to the Allies (six questions, 1939–1941). Opinion became more favorable toward defending Canada if invaded (1939–1941), and opposition increased against sending war materials

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To be sure, Almond can be read as stressing that changes are rapid rather than capricious, but he suggests opinions will respond rapidly to a crisis and then continue to shift abruptly back and forth. He calls this reaction "a mood, a superficial and fluctuating response" (Almond, 1950:53), which presumably cannot be explained any further.
to Japan. After the United States entered the war, the public became less concerned that Russia and China pay for their lend-lease assistance (early 1942). As the war progressed, preferences shifted about wartime goals and postwar issues; Americans showed increasing support for the destruction of Germany (1943–1944) and for the acquisition of new military bases from Japan (1943–1944).

After the war abrupt changes occurred concerning the developing confrontation with the Soviet Union and world communism, and the related issues of foreign aid and control of atomic weapons. The public usually responded quickly to threats abroad, turning militant as conditions became menacing, and becoming less so as conditions relaxed. During the immediate postwar period, support increased for stopping Russia in Europe and Asia (1946–1947), maintaining unilateral control (for defense bases) of islands captured from Japan (1946–1947), universal military training (1947–1948), military aid to South America (1946–1947), and military supplies for use against the Chinese Communists (1948). Public opinion sometimes reversed itself as time passed, quite possibly because the foreign threat appeared less urgent, or because further massive economic aid would bring diminished returns to America's security. In early 1949, for example, there was a drop in approval for military aid to strengthen Europe against future attack. There was a decline in support for the Marshall Plan, and more of the public felt we were spending too much on European recovery (1949). Support fell sharply in the case of military aid to China as the Nationalists failed to win their civil war.

Other shifts in opinions about confronting communism, too, can be linked with events or international conditions. Support increased for military aid to Europe when NATO was established in April 1949. The public became firmer toward Russia after the treaty was signed (June 1949–March 1950), and there was greater agreement that it was very important to stop the spread of world communism. Later, Stalin's death and the Korean armistice reduced world tension, and there was a drop in support for war against Russia (November 1951–September 1954). Preferences also became more favorable toward a trade agreement with Russia (August 1953–June 1955), but just after the Soviets crushed the revolts in Eastern Europe, public opinion cooled, shifting against cultural exchanges of musicians and athletes (November 1956–March 1957). Support for the control of atomic weapons was likely also affected by U.S. and Soviet actions. From February to October 1947, public approval of UN inspection rose, while in March the Soviets rejected a proposal for UN control. After the announcement in September 1949 that the Soviets had exploded an A-bomb and after Truman ordered the development of the H-bomb
(January 1950), public opinion again moved against international control (October 1949–June 1950). (Similarly, opposition to the ratification of the Salt II treaty almost 30 years later increased as government officials and experts voiced dissatisfaction with various aspects of the agreement [March–October 1979].)

The Korean War heightened feelings of confrontation and crisis, and the public reacted quickly to the progress of the war. At the time of Korea, NATO was also being bolstered, so that U.S. policy was confronting communism in Europe and in Asia. Abrupt but plausible changes in preferences occurred concerning policies for both continents. The Korean conflict began in June 1950, and from April 1950 to June 1951 surveys showed that the defense of Asia against communism gained in importance compared to Europe. But support for European defenses also increased as more people responded that Russia (as opposed, presumably, to other Communist countries; Communist China entered the Korean War in late November 1950) was a greater threat there than in Asia (August 1950–January 1951).

Although the public came to be less in favor of American troops in Europe (September–December 1950), its support for military aid to Europe increased (March 1950–March 1951, November 1951–February 1952). There was also greater willingness to allow Germany to build up an army (June 1950–July 1950) and participate in Europe’s defense (October 1951–February 1952). When the Korean War began, Americans placed increased emphasis on the role of the UN in U.S. foreign policy (June 1950–July 1950), but as the war deepened, the public gave greater importance to alliances and to America’s own defenses (July 1950–March 1951).

With the start of the Korean conflict, public opinion became more favorable toward economic aid to friendly Asian countries (July 1950–April 1951); and interestingly, support increased for Hawaiian statehood (January 1950–July 1950), conceivably because of its vulnerability as a distant territory. During the war’s first few months, more and more people responded that not enough sacrifices were being made for national defense (October 1950–December 1950), but six months later, as the conflict wore on, such enthusiasm declined. After the truce talks began in July 1951, support for bombing China fell (August–October 1950), but it rose again as the negotiations dragged on (October 1951–March 1952). Subsequently, opinion shifted in favor of pulling out of Korea (December 1951–February 1952), and also toward training and equipping the South Korean army (February 1952–November 1952). From March to June 1952 opposition increased against returning POWs who did not want to go back to North Korea. The public seemed to respond to the course of events in
the war but also to maintain an underlying commitment to contain communism. Perhaps for this reason preferences showed increased support for sending U.S. troops to Indochina from the month after the Korean Armistice to the day Dienbienphu fell (August 1953–May 7, 1954).

The rest of the 1950s were relatively quiet, but we also observed several abrupt changes in opinion during the Vietnam War period. As the war in Vietnam escalated, preferences shifted against stepping up the war effort from April to May 1965 when President Johnson made overtures for negotiations and halted bombing for five days. Opinion moved in the opposite direction from August to November 1965, with people becoming more willing to vote for congressmen who favored sending more men to Vietnam, after North Vietnam apparently failed to respond to the bombing halt. From February to April 1968 opinion became less “hawkish” as the Tet offensive was interpreted as a disaster. Opinion shifted again from June to September against a bombing halt as the peace talks in Paris became deadlocked. Support for the withdrawal of U.S. troops grew rapidly as President Nixon slowly removed U.S. soldiers from Vietnam: from December 1969 to May 1970 preferences increased in favor of complete withdrawal by the end of 1970. This rapid opinion change may have also been a response to the invasion of Cambodia and the ensuing turmoil at home after the Kent State shootings. A final change in opinion related to Vietnam concerned punishment for draft evaders. From June 1972 to February 1973 more people responded that they would not allow these men to return without punishment. This may have become a sensitive issue as it appeared more and more likely that the efforts of American troops in Vietnam had failed.

There were far fewer abrupt shifts in public preferences in the area of domestic policy, but some occurred during periods of urgency in foreign affairs or at times of changing economic conditions. From December 1943 to March 1945, when people were experiencing worse inflation than ever before, the public increasingly wanted the government to keep prices and wages from going higher. In contrast, from October 1950 to October 1951, opposition rose against wage and price controls during a year of substantial price increases. But people may have preferred tax cuts, in order to put more money into their pockets; from February 1951 to February 1952 more Americans felt that taxes were too high, and from August 1951 to April 1952 support increased for a 25 percent limit on taxes. Prices rose less the following year, and the drop from February 1952 to February 1953 in responses that taxes were too high may have reflected this. Although prices began rising sharply in 1965 with the escalation of the Vietnam War,
there were fewer responses that a wage-price freeze would be a good idea during the war. During this period unemployment was dropping substantially; hence real disposable income rose greatly, and economic conditions were seen as reasonably good. This was not the case from February 1978 to May 1979, when opinion favoring wage and price controls rose, especially by April 1978; prices were increasing at a record rate, while the unemployment rate changed hardly at all.

Spending preferences may have also been sensitive to inflation. From January 1957 to July 1957 support dropped for federal aid to build schools; prices at this time were rising faster than any year since 1951. Similarly, support for welfare spending dropped considerably from February 1975 to April 1976, as prices continued their mid-1970s climb.

Economics undoubtedly influenced opinion toward policies affecting the availability of gasoline. During the period from May to August 1979, the high price and scarcity of gasoline contributed to the increased public support for presidential authority to ration gas.

Government activity, events, and changing circumstances were also apparently related to shifts in preferences concerning labor issues, crime, and various executive actions. Public support for the Child Labor Amendment, approved by Congress in 1922, increased from April 1936 to February 1937 as it was finally being considered seriously by several state legislatures. The increased threat of war probably underlay the shift in opinion from October to November 1941 against the right to strike in defense industries. After the United States entered World War II and the immediate danger of defeat diminished, and as workers put in long hours in war industries, support declined for working more than 48 hours per week without overtime (March 1942 to October 1942).

From September 1965 to January 1966 public opposition rose against a seven-day strike limit. During this period President Johnson averted a steelworkers' strike, although there had also been a 25-day strike by newspaper workers in New York. Public opinion, however, became more favorable toward the strike limit from December 1965 to August 1966 after strikes by airline machinists, New York City transit workers, and railway firemen.

Public support for capital punishment and for more severe criminal penalties increased most rapidly when the crime rate began to climb and when spectacular crime-related events attracted attention. Public demand for harsher treatment of criminals by the courts rose sharply from April to September 1965. Although this may have been triggered by the rioting in Watts in mid-August, it was probably also a response
to the report of a sudden increase in crime beginning in 1964. Closer analysis of the survey evidence has shown that fear of crime was strongly related to the desire for harsher courts in 1965—more so than in later years (Stinchcombe et al., 1980:67–68, Table 21). From May 1966 to June 1967, opinion favoring capital punishment rose, and during this time people may have been responding to the murder of eight nurses by Richard Speck. March 1972 to November 1972 was also a period in which support increased for this punishment; in June 1972 the Supreme Court ruled the death penalty unconstitutional, after years in which there had been major riots, assassinations, and highly publicized murders.

Of all the policy preferences we examined, opinions toward Nixon and Watergate showed the most dramatic rapid change: a drop of 34 percent in the opposition to impeaching the president and compelling him to leave office, from June 1973 to May 1974, as evidence of his misdeeds accumulated. From June 1974 to August 1974 the public also became increasingly favorable toward bringing Nixon to trial, and from June to August 1974 support for his removal from office rose by 13 percent. Related closely to this issue was opinion favoring public versus private campaign contributions, which also climbed from June 1973 to September 1973.

Watergate was certainly unique, but opinions also changed abruptly about presidential activity and policy making on a few other occasions. When President Roosevelt tried to reorganize the Supreme Court, public opinion moved against him, favoring less power for the president (1937–1938). After President Truman proposed his national health plan, debate and controversy apparently led to greater public opposition (1949). In contrast, preferences became more favorable toward integrating public facilities between June 1963 and January 1964, two months after President Kennedy’s death.

Because abrupt changes in preferences are intrinsically interesting and have been relatively neglected in the literature, we have devoted more attention to them than their number alone would warrant. It is well to remember that they are only exceptions to the general rule of gradual change or no change at all. But our main point here is that when preferences do shift rapidly, there is no reason to presume that the public is fickle, confused, or irrational; most abrupt changes have been associated with important objective events.

**Conclusion**

Our examination of the data indicates that there has been considerable stability in Americans’ policy preferences. Half of our 613 re-
peated items showed no significant change at all, and nearly half the significant changes we did find were modest in size—less than 10 percentage points. Most changes were gradual. Only rarely did preferences fluctuate back and forth to a statistically significant extent within a short period.

Moreover, when opinion changes did occur, they were not random or inexplicable; they were usually related to important changes in citizens' lives and in their social and economic environments. Abrupt shifts in preferences generally coincided with major events in international affairs or the economy.

To be sure, our discussion of the causes of opinion change is only intended to be suggestive, not definitive. A considerably more sophisticated analysis than just matching events and preference changes is required if we are to understand fully such important aspects of opinion dynamics as the impact of event stimuli, the role of the media, and the nature of time lags and diffusion processes (see Erbring, 1980; Erbring et al., 1980). In particular, we do not wish to give the impression that public preferences are necessarily an autonomous engine of democracy, welling up from individuals' objective needs and external realities, and presenting themselves to politicians for action. Quite a different picture is also consistent with the data (and is hinted at in our discussion): a picture of public opinion, especially on foreign policy, as subject to leadership or manipulation by politicians, interest groups, and others—public opinion that is created or molded, as well as responded to. We intend to pursue these themes in the future.

For now, we would only emphasize that Americans' policy preferences have tended to move, when they have changed at all, in orderly and understandable ways. The evidence suggests that citizens may be more responsible than volatile. If this is so, students of democratic politics may want to reconsider the nature and political role of public opinion. Connections between citizens' preferences and the policymaking process seem eminently worthy of reexamination.

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