FALSE STARTS, DEAD ENDS,
AND NEW OPPORTUNITIES
IN PUBLIC OPINION
RESEARCH

ABSTRACT: Empirical research on public opinion has tended to misjudge the normative rationales for modern democracy. Although it is often presumed that citizens’ policy preferences are the opinions of interest to democratic theorists, and that democracy requires a highly informed citizenry, neither of these premises represents a dominant position in mainstream democratic theory. Besides incorrect assumptions about major tenets of democratic theory, empirical research on civic engagement is running into dead ends that will require normative analysis to overcome. Bringing political philosophy back into the study of public opinion can not only remedy shortcomings in the empirical literature, but can also underscore how relevant that literature is for a wide range of problems in democratic practice.
The essence of progress, it has been said, consists in leaving the ashes and taking the flames from the altars of one’s forebears.

—Paul Lazarsfeld (1957, 53)

All too often, public-opinion scholarship makes assumptions about the philosophical import of empirical findings that turn out to be unsound—so often, and so unsound, that some of the core premises organizing the social-scientific literature on public opinion might be judged irrelevant from the standpoint of political philosophy. Among these premises is the widely held belief that democratic theory requires an informed citizenry. The narrowly empirical investigation of public opinion that has taken hold in many corners of the social sciences also leads to dead ends in the research literature itself—barriers to further progress that cannot be overcome without resorting to philosophical inquiry.

As the dual problems of false starts and dead ends are more apparent today than in the past, the time may soon be near for rejoining empirical to philosophical scholarship on public opinion. Such a synthesis promises new opportunities for an improved and stimulating research agenda, one positioned to yield important insights about the practice of democratic politics.

Philip Converse’s prodigiously generative “Belief Systems” essay represents neither a false start nor a dead end. Yet despite Converse’s careful efforts to focus squarely on empirical rather than philosophical questions, his scholarly audience often inferred connections between its findings and the core requirements of democratic theory that turned out to be mistaken. Of the voluminous array of publications that appeared in response to “Belief Systems,” to my knowledge only one article authored by a public-opinion scholar ever investigated the role of ideological constraint in democratic theory (Marcus 1988). Appearing nearly 25 years after Converse’s essay, this lone article argued that democratic theory required nothing like ideological constraint among ordinary citizens. To the contrary, it concluded that high levels of ideological constraint in the mass public would make a Madisonian theory of democracy nearly impossible to realize. Yet this article’s strong challenge to the normative import of Converse’s essay has been overlooked or ignored by subsequent research in this tradition.

In addition to questionable assumptions about the import of “Belief Systems” for democratic theory, the public-opinion literature that followed has been so successful at expanding the empirical foundation of Converse’s thesis that further progress may require addressing thorny
philosophical questions about such things as how to define political interests. Despite progress over the past 40 years in the analytical sophistication of public-opinion research, the field’s continued neglect of scholarly work in democratic theory leaves it increasingly unable to solve puzzles that do not yield to the latest regression models.

The joining of quantitative and philosophical modes of inquiry would produce what Paul Lazarsfeld (1957) called public-opinion research in the “classical tradition”: using empirical analysis to explore key issues in political philosophy. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Sullivan, Pireson, and Marcus 1982; Natchez 1985; Bartels 1990; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Jacobs and Shapiro 2000; Lupia 2002; Bartels 2003; Mutz 2006), little such research has been conducted by public-opinion scholars in the half century since Lazarsfeld first implored the field to rekindle attention to its philosophical roots. My interest in the present essay is to assess how continued neglect of the classical tradition has influenced the development of public opinion research in the decades since “Belief Systems” was published; to reposition Lazarsfeld’s concerns in a way that highlights the relevance of his argument for contemporary scholars; and to suggest some promising lines of inquiry for bringing philosophical perspectives back in to empirical research on public opinion.

**Bringing Philosophy Back In**

Since this essay advocates the importance of political philosophy to social-scientific research on public opinion, it begins with a confession: I am not a political philosopher, nor am I likely ever to become one. My acquaintance with political philosophy is that of a sojourner rather than a citizen of the realm, and my knowledge of the domain has been gained in fits and starts by following normative questions flushed out, from time to time, from the brambles of my empirical research.

By training I am a quantitative political scientist, so my growing interest in taking excursions through the unfamiliar thickets of democratic theory may have begun as an unusual but probably harmless reaction to the stresses of graduate school. Yet over time, I have become more certain that this nagging urge to join philosophical to empirical inquiry is not merely a sign of character weakness. It is also an impulse to broaden the audience for empirical research on public opinion, to re-
connect this research to its own history, and to expose misleading ideas about what is politically important in such work.

Lest the reader be tempted to think this essay yet another contribution to the vast array of libels, rants, and slanders against the empirical analysis of public opinion, nothing could be further from the mark. My point is to focus attention on the ways that this impressive body of empirical research has neglected to clarify how crucially important it really is to the practice of democracy, by failing to connect with core concepts of democratic theory founded in political philosophy.

Such connections were once very prominent. Take, for example, the debate over the public’s role in democratic governance that occurred between John Dewey and Walter Lippmann in the 1920s. This dialogue pitted the idealistic and aging Dewey, in his 60s and soon to retire from a philosophy chair at Columbia University, against the 30-something upstart Lippmann, an incisive and prolific news commentator recently jaded by the apparent effectiveness of government propaganda during the First World War (which he observed from a unique vantage point as President Wilson’s Assistant Secretary of War).

The debate between these two giants, which produced a series of books (Lippmann 1922 and 1925; Dewey 1927), moved forward from the premise that democratic theory required ordinary citizens to be informed and interested in politics (e.g., Lippmann [1922] 1949, 161–66; Dewey 1927, 157) to the question of whether democracy so defined was even possible in the modern age. Dewey argued that a modern form of popular democracy could be recovered by localizing and properly contextualizing politics. He saw problems in the scale and complexity of modern society as essentially problems of communication. Lippmann countered that the mass public’s limited ability to comprehend realities it could not directly experience made problems of scale and complexity so insurmountable that democracy could be saved only by diminishing its reliance on citizen involvement.

The Lippmann-Dewey debate soon fragmented into separate discussions among empirical researchers and political philosophers, but these conversations could nonetheless be profound. Anyone who has read through the first two decades of *Public Opinion Quarterly* is struck by the broad and substantive philosophical issues that were wrestled with in those pages, almost exclusively by empirical researchers. No longer is this the norm, nor has it been for many years. By the time Converse’s “Belief Systems” essay was published, the philosophical dust had already
settled into hidden corners, and the core controversies were about method, not metaphysics.

Perhaps the early public-opinion research community was forced to legitimate itself by taking up debates that crossed disciplinary boundaries and methodological fault lines. If so, those early efforts were successful. Nowadays, prowess in philosophical swordsmanship is certainly not a prerequisite for getting empirical research published. It is quite enough to locate one’s empirical work within established research questions. The enterprising soul might venture to cite the normative thinking of early empiricists like Berelson and Lazarsfeld, but few have ever gone back to the primary literature in philosophy from which those researchers themselves drew. By attending only to what have become the canonical voices in the empirical public-opinion literature, we seem to have collectively forgotten that their claims were contested, sometimes vigorously.

The absence of current controversy over the empiricists’ normative pronouncements may have more to do with their lack of sustained engagement in these theoretical debates than with any one perspective winning by force of the better argument. Over the years, these debates died of neglect more than withering fire (e.g., Natchez 1985 and Glasser and Salmon 1995), largely because the empiricists withdrew from such theoretical contests to devote themselves more fully to questions of method and data analysis.

Yet public-opinion research ignores political philosophy at its own peril, for without it, empirical work on what researchers perceive to be important problems for democratic societies may amount to a house of straw built on a foundation of sand: easy to blow over, and unlikely to survive the test of time. The field would do well to consider these debates again, but not merely because they were left hanging. The benefits of joining empirical with philosophical inquiry are many: doing so can help us avoid false starts and dead ends in the agenda of empirical public opinion research; provide a wide range of testable hypotheses and novel ideas long neglected by empirical researchers; and clarify how relevant empirical research can be to the larger concerns of democratic practice that have occupied the attention of theorists and leaders for the last 2,500 years.

I. FALSE STARTS

The public-opinion research agenda has gotten off to some unfortunate false starts—now well entrenched in old ruts—as a consequence of its
disengagement with political philosophy. Two of these are especially
troubling, because they have assumed nearly doctrinal status as core as-
sumptions in the research literature.

Public Opinion Should Evaluate Governmental Policies

The first of these two false starts stems from assuming that the public
opinions of interest to social scientists should be the reactions of or-
dinary citizens to the policy choices offered by political leaders. This is
the idea of public opinion as a form of coercive feedback that helps
hold political leaders accountable for their actions.

The role played by citizens in holding leaders to account is a core
tenet of all theories of democracy, but most theories seek to satisfy this
requirement electorally, through infrequent voting, rather than through
continuous feedback such as is now provided by opinion surveys. In
part, this is because elections simplify the judgmental task. Competing
candidates present themselves as alternative choices for the future, al-
lowing citizens to decide, on whatever basis they find credible, which
candidate represents the better option. Choosing among competing
candidates is quite another thing from choosing among rival policy
proposals, where the complexity of problems, the frequency with
which such judgments must be made, and staggering information costs
place enormous cognitive burdens on even the policy expert, let alone
the typical voter.

Surveys of public preferences about policy alternatives can be inter-
esting and illuminating, particularly for understanding how citizens
think about politics. But such interest begs the larger question of
whether these kinds of opinions are in fact important to democratic
politics (Natchez 1985; Ciepley 1999).

To get a sense of the range of opinions that might be politically rele-
vant in democracies, consider the decision phrase matrix outlined by
Vincent Price and Peter Neijens (1997). Distilling a vast literature on
collective decision making, Price and Neijens divide the process of ar-
riving at democratic decisions into a series of discrete stages. In each
stage, various actors ranging from elected leaders and interest groups to
journalists and attentive publics can play different roles or contribute
different kinds of information.

The process begins with (1) an “elicitation of values” stage, in which
a problem is defined along with the values and goals considered impor-
tant in resolving the problem. Once the problem and relevant goals have been clarified, alternative solutions for addressing the problem are advanced and debated in (2) the “development of options” stage, in which the number of possible options is reduced to a set of feasible alternatives. Once this winnowing process is completed, the pros, cons, and likely outcomes of each alternative are determined in (3) the “estimation of consequences” stage. Having clarified the probable consequences of each alternative, the decision process advances to (4) the “evaluation of alternatives” stage, in which advocates for each proposal attempt to persuade others of its merits. Characterized by active public deliberation and heightened press coverage to the issue, this stage “is the phase that is most clearly identified as public discourse” (Price and Niejens 1997, 340), and is marked by widespread attention to the issue even among ordinary citizens. Finally, public discussion of the merits of each proposed solution comes to a close at (5) the “decision” stage, when an individual, institutional, or collective decision selects one of the proposed solutions to remedy the problem.

Interest groups, politicians, news media, and other political actors are active during each of the five stages, and different models of democracy rely, to various degrees, on each actor contributing in specific ways to the decision-making process. For example, liberal theories of democracy tend to reserve a dominant role in the first three stages for experts, politicians, and interest groups. When it comes to the role of citizen preferences in the larger decision-making process, Price and Niejens (1997, 352) observe that opinion surveys were intended by their early proponents “to advance a particular aspect of quality—broad participation—at a particular phase of the decision-making process—the evaluation [of policy alternatives] stage.” They note that with few exceptions, the potential for opinion polls to contribute to democratic decision making almost always has been understood to occur within that penultimate stage.

This standard role that social scientists attribute to public opinion in the democratic process is hard to square with the mainstream writings of contemporary democratic theory. Many contemporary theorists draw a basic distinction between “strong” and “weak” conceptions of citizenship in democratic societies (Barber 1984; see also Thompson 1970, Habermas 1996b, and Hoffman 1998). Strong theories place a heavy reliance on citizen involvement in political decision making, while weak theories place greater dependence on elected representatives and other elites in a political division of labor, leaving citizens to
provide a limited but important form of representational accountability through the ballot box.

Although the mainstream of public-opinion research seems compatible with weak theories of citizenship, with its assumption that public opinion has a limited role in a larger political division of labor, the same research often assumes, with the strong theories, that ordinary citizens also should be attentive to, and willing to take an active part in, public-policy deliberation. It may be possible to reconcile these competing assumptions, but absent such a grand synthesis, they might strike the political philosopher as somewhat contradictory. Indeed, these competing claims bear a stronger resemblance to descriptive models of the opinion-formation processes elaborated by social theorists of the late nineteenth century, such as Gabriel Tarde and James Bryce, than to any prescriptive model of citizen involvement drawn from the canonical texts of normative political philosophy.

Rival normative theories of democracy naturally envision different roles for citizens to perform, and they vary widely in their conceptions of what citizenship entails (Held 1996; Minar 1960). It would be oversimplifying matters to suggest that democratic theorists have a standard list of duties for citizens. But a wide range of democratic theories implies three important roles for the opinions of ordinary citizens, none of them falling in the “evaluation of alternatives” stage: clarifying the ends that a society should strive for, as opposed to clarifying the means of attaining those ends; articulating collective values that structure tradeoffs and define just outcomes or procedures, as opposed to articulating collective preferences for either means or ends; and identifying problems that require government action, as opposed to identifying solutions to those problems (Althaus 2003, ch. 8). In contrast to the implicit expectations of the empirical public-opinion literature, these three common roles for ordinary citizens detailed by political philosophers are all performed within the first stage of Price and Neijen’s decision scheme.

Thus, it is a false start to assume that democratic theories commonly place an important emphasis on developing citizen preferences over a broad range of public policies. This may be true for some theories, particularly those emerging in the late twentieth century (e.g., Barber 1984; Dahl 1989), but by no means all. While there are many good reasons for studying citizens’ opinions about public policy, a broad mandate from normative democratic theory is not among them.
The “Problem” of an Ill-Informed Public

A second false start in public-opinion research is the apparent problem for democratic practice revealed by the discovery of an ill-informed public. This problem emerged in the literature with the 1922 publication of Lippmann’s *Public Opinion*, and became a central concern following the publication of Converse’s “Belief Systems” essay. It continues to this day either as the foil against which the latest musings of Citizen Dimwit are fretted over, or as an ill that may be averted in practice by such balms as information shortcuts, on-line processing, and preference aggregation.

It is clear that polities benefit when political knowledge is high and evenly distributed. Many shortcomings and inefficiencies in political systems could be remedied if ordinary citizens were more attentive to public affairs and, as a consequence, more aware of their political interests (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Somin 1998; Althaus 2003). But what core tenet of democratic theory is being offended by the mass public’s apparent lack of civic-mindedness?

Certainly the interests of many citizens will be at stake in any policy decision, but it is another thing to presume that democracy requires citizens to exercise vigilance over every interest they might have. The institutions of representative as opposed to direct democracy are designed precisely to avoid encumbering citizens with such an onerous responsibility.

The cause for alarm seems to be the (now clearly unrealistic) expectations of an informed citizenry developed in what is generally referred to as the “classical theory of democracy.” For instance, Lippmann ([1922] 1949, 162) disparaged the ideal of an “omnicompetent citizen” presumed by “those thinkers of the Eighteenth Century who designed the matrix of democracy.” Joseph Schumpeter ([1942] 1976, 250) similarly contrasted his realist view of democracy with an outmoded “eighteenth-century philosophy of democracy.” Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee (1954; Berelson 1952) confronted expectations from “the normative theory of political democracy” with the depressing results of opinion surveys. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba (1963, 10) likewise used survey data to test and ultimately challenge the “ideological norms of democracy” presumed by “theorists of democracy from Aristotle to Bryce [who] have stressed that democracies are maintained by active
citizen participation in civic affairs, by a high level of information about public affairs, and by a widespread sense of civic responsibility.”

Political philosophers have roundly dismissed this now-standard way of framing the normative implications of public opinion research as ill specified and overgeneralized, as have a few empirical researchers (notably Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). It is telling, observes Dennis Thompson (1970, 6–7), that “in many discussions of the normative implications of empirical studies, actual theorists are seldom cited. A classical theory of democracy, constructed from fragments of the most optimistic eighteenth- and nineteenth-century democratic ideology, becomes the target for attack. Such a straw-man theory is easily demolished.” In contrast, Thompson adds, “if theories actually held by serious writers are considered . . . a theory of democratic citizenship looks much more respectable.”

Take, for instance, the view of ordinary citizens advanced in John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty:

The general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind. . . . Those whose opinions go by the name of public opinion are not always the same sort of public. . . . But they are always a mass, that is to say, collective mediocrity. And what is a still greater novelty, the mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers. I am not complaining of all this. I do not assert that anything better is compatible, as a general rule, with the present low state of the human mind. But that does not hinder the government of mediocrity from being mediocre government. No government by a democracy or a numerous aristocracy, either in its political acts or in the opinions, qualities, and tone of mind which it fosters, ever did or could rise above mediocrity, except in so far as a sovereign Many have let themselves be guided (which in their best times they always have done) by the councils and influence of a more highly gifted and instructed One or Few. (Mill [1861] 1972, 134.)

In Mill’s scheme, a representative parliament serves as the “One or Few” that rescues modern democracy from the ineptitude of the ordinary citizen. Far from presuming that the typical citizen would hold firm opinions on public policy, let alone informed ones, Mill’s argu-
ment for universal suffrage explicitly marginalized what he regarded as an ignorant multitude: “But though every one ought to have a voice—that every one should have an equal voice is a totally different proposition” (ibid., 306). In a tone that might seem shocking to modern ears, Mill’s defense of universal suffrage was premised on the idea that it is not useful, but hurtful, that the constitution of the country should declare ignorance to be entitled to as much political power as knowledge. The national institutions should place all things that they are concerned with before the mind of the citizen in the light in which it is for his good that he should regard them: and as it is for his good that he should think that everyone is entitled to some influence, but the better and wiser to more than others, it is important that this conviction should be professed by the State, and embodied in the national institutions. (Ibid., 312.)

Thus did Mill argue that every literate adult should have one vote, so long as every university graduate could cast two or more. In advancing what is by today’s standards a decidedly elitist system, Mill was nonetheless derided by his contemporaries as a “radical” for his progressive views on universal suffrage. Mill is perhaps better remembered for advancing the novel view that civic participation should create more engaged citizens (Mansbridge 1999), but these passages make clear that his theory of democracy depended not a whit on grandiose expectations for citizen involvement.

To many political philosophers like Thompson, the problem is not that John Stuart Mill alone has been taken out of context. The larger issue is that public-opinion scholars seem to have misinterpreted the entire canon of democratic thinking from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In a frontal assault on the normative presumptions underlying contemporary public-opinion research, Carole Pateman (1970, 17, emph. original) concludes bluntly that no such thing as a “classical theory” ever existed:

What neither its critics or its defenders have realized is that the notion of a ‘classical theory of democracy’ is a myth. Neither side in the controversy has done the obvious, and the necessary, and looked in detail at what the earlier theorists did in fact have to say. Because of this the myth of a “classical” theory continues and the views and the nature of the theories of the earlier writers on democracy are persistently misrepresented.
If Pateman and Thompson are right, then where did we get the idea, still driving empirical research, that citizens should be so knowledgeable about politics?

In part, this second false start seems to be predicated on the first one: the conventional belief that surveys are best used to evaluate the merits of government policies. After all, how can citizen verdicts on public policy be taken seriously if the jury is shown to be unacquainted with the object of its judgment?

This might explain why concern about the apparently insufficient supply of citizen attention to politics has been sustained in the empirical literature, but it reveals little about the origins of this expectation.

Until long after the founding of the American republic, mass democracy was consistently viewed in intellectual circles more as an historical footnote than a living idea, a noble theory that brought calamity in practice because ordinary citizens could never consistently be wise or knowledgeable enough to govern themselves. One needed only point to the democratic experiment in classical Athens, which produced a momentary flowering of popular government followed by rapid descent into oligarchy from which it never recovered. This helps explain why normative democratic theorists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were so distrustful of mass politics: their daunting challenge was finding a way to usher citizen’s interests into political institutions while ensuring that few actual commoners ever made it past the reception desk. Handing over the keys was simply unthinkable.

The second and probably more formative basis for expecting an informed citizenry came, in the United States at least, from popular rhetoric and Progressive-era ideals. Although the informed citizen has long had a place in American political oratory, the expectations for the informed citizen were rather limited until the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in keeping with the prevailing skepticism about mass democracy. Richard Brown’s detailed (1996) history of the informed citizen ideal is quite clear on this point. During the Revolutionary War era, political leaders sought narrowly to raise popular awareness of the political rights and liberties being infringed by the British Crown. Similar concerns animated numerous statements about the importance of an informed citizenry made by the Founding Fathers. Yet such statements are easy to misinterpret in light of modern expectations about the informed citizen, particularly for contemporary readers lacking a clear sense of the communication problems of late eighteenth-century America.
Consider, for instance, Thomas Jefferson’s apparent endorsement of the informed citizen ideal in this oft-quoted excerpt from a letter to Edward Carrington:

Were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers, or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them.

When taken out of its original context, as is typical today, Jefferson might seem to suggest that democracies rise or fall on the ability of ordinary citizens to develop informed preferences about matters of government policy. Yet in its original context, the passage makes quite another point. Jefferson’s letter, dated January 16, 1787, was a response to early reports reaching him in Paris about Shay’s Rebellion, which had begun in the fall of 1786. From across the Atlantic, Jefferson sees the rebellion as a forgivable “error” of the people that can be attributed to the absence of a national system of communication:

I am persuaded myself that the good sense of the people will always be found to be the best army. They may be led astray for a moment, but will soon correct themselves. The people are the only censors of their governors: and even their errors will tend to keep these to the true principles of their institution. To punish these errors too severely would be to suppress the only safeguard of the public liberty. The way to prevent these irregular interpositions of the people is to give them full information of their affairs thro’ the channel of the public papers, and to contrive that those papers should penetrate the whole mass of the people. The basis of our governments being the opinion of the people, the very first object should be to keep that right; and were it left to me to decide whether we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter. But I should mean that every man should receive those papers and be capable of reading them. I am convinced that those societies (as the Indians) which live without government enjoy in their general mass an infinitely greater degree of happiness than those who live under the European governments. Among the former, public opinion is in the place of law, and restrains morals as powerfully as laws ever did anywhere. Among the latter, under pretence of governing they have divided their nations into two classes, wolves and sheep. I do not exaggerate. This is a true picture of Europe. Cherish therefore the spirit of our people, and keep alive their attention. Do not be too severe upon their errors, but reclaim them.
by enlightening them. If once they become inattentive to the public af-
fairs, you and I, and Congress and Assemblies, judges and governors shall
all become wolves. (Boyd 1950, 48–49, emph. added.)

Thus, Jefferson’s concern is not so much how to develop policy pref-
ferences among commoners, but rather how to prevent rebellions from
arising from misunderstandings induced by poor communication be-
tween governments and citizens. Jefferson prefers rule by public opin-
ion to rule by law, by which he means social control exercised through
the force of moral consensus and popular customs held by the larger
community.\(^1\) The only way to ensure such rule by public opinion is to
improve the lines of communication between the various local com-
munities that formed the new republic. Doing so would enhance the
ability of citizens to hold their governments politically accountable, and
address the difficulty that political leaders of the time had in under-
standing the problems and concerns of their constituents.

Bruce Bimber (2003) identifies these information problems as a cen-
tral but largely forgotten concern in the debate between Federalists and
Anti-Federalists. Public communication in the early decades of the re-
public was almost entirely local rather than national (for details, see
Brown 1989). Bimber (2003, 48) notes that because a national mail sys-
tem would not be constructed until the 1820s, in Jefferson’s day there
was no efficient or systematic means of information exchange that
would allow national representatives to communicate adequately with
those they represented:

The political consequences of this . . . absence of national-scale com-
munication can scarcely be exaggerated. Representation rested on only
the sketchiest of foundations, since public officials had no systematic
way of knowing more than a little about their constituents. By the
same token, the capacity of voters to assign responsibility for outcomes
and hold officials accountable was limited, since even the most atten-
tive elites found it hard to form a clear picture of the details of policy
making. The concerns of citizens in one community could not be
readily communicated to those in another, and conversations about the
national interests did not take place outside of individual communities
and councils of elites.

Far from supposing that ordinary citizens could or should judge the
soundness of public policy, the immediate concerns of the Founders
were ensuring that citizens communicated their grievances with ballots
rather than musket balls, and enhancing the public’s ability to hold leaders to account through the popular vote. Until well into the mid-nineteenth century, the conduct of politics between elections was widely considered the privileged business of aristocrats and gentlemen rather than commoners (Schudson 1998). As a consequence, throughout most of the nineteenth century, the elite debate over citizen competence in the United States focused on the boundaries of suffrage rights (Brown 1996; Smith 1999; Bennett 2006). The informed citizen existed as an ideal type who was occasionally praised in political rhetoric, but its practical application was usually in service to the question of which citizens could be trusted to cast a competent vote, where competence was often defined as being sufficiently invested in the well-being of the community, rather than as an ability to diagnose its political problems.

Michael Schudson (1998) argues that the contemporary ideal of the informed citizen rose to prominence during the early twentieth century in a popular (but loosely anchored) rendition of “democratic theory” championed by Progressives bent on reforming the excesses of political corruption in the Gilded Age party system. While it is unclear whether this new Progressive ideal of the citizen as nonpartisan policy specialist was solely responsible for coloring later readings of “classical democratic theory,” little doubt remains today that the foundations of democratic theory were hardly shaken by the empirical finding that the typical citizen maintains a sleepy indifference toward most things political.

The ideal of the citizen informed about matters of policy is thus of much more recent vintage than many students of public opinion recognize (cf. Natchez 1985). Raising the public’s interest in politics has always been a challenge in democracies, which is why the idea of popular self-rule was controversial even during the golden age of classical Athens. The Athenians had chronic difficulties attracting a quorum of citizens to the Assembly of the People (Hansen 1991), the main arena for popular involvement in political decisions. First they appealed to civic virtue. When that failed, they tried punishment: recalcitrants were fined and publicly shamed by having their clothing daubed with red paint. But neither did this approach solve the problem of popular disengagement. The winning solution discovered by the Athenians, in what was surely an underappreciated historical first, was the offer of cold, hard cash for showing up. Once the rate of pay was fixed to be more lucrative for the average citizen than the comparable amount of time spent at work, the quorum problem was solved. (The new chal-
lange became the pronounced skew of Assembly participants toward the lower economic classes.)

A further insight into Greek expectations is given by the seating capacity of the Pnyx—the meeting place of the Assembly—which could accommodate, at best, only about a fifth of the citizens eligible to participate (Hansen 1991, 130–32). Even Athenian hopes for popular involvement were never so high as to presume that the typical citizen would show up to hear speeches and cast a vote. As classicist L. B. Carter (1986, 193, emph. original) notes:

> It comes as a shock to be reminded . . . that a full meeting of the assembly numbered about 6,000 men, but that the citizen population . . . was around 30,000. The Athenians had _never seen_ a full meeting of the citizen body, though the very idea of democracy was predicated on it. From the very start they must have accepted that any meeting of the assembly was bound to be a sample of the citizenship—and not even a random sample: the assembly was inevitably going to reflect the views of the town-dwellers against those living in the outlying villages and hamlets.

The ancient Romans described the common freemen collectively as the _vulgus_, and it is no accident that the modern word _vulgar_ derives from it: throughout most of history “the people” were considered common not only in numbers, but in the coarseness of their reasoning. When eighteenth-century theorists were awakening to the possibility that republican ideas might be retooled to serve as the basis for a form of government more in keeping with the modern era than monarchy, their designs did not tend to place much weight in the hands of ordinary people. (Rousseau, more pessimistic than most about the merits of representation, seems to be the main exception.) The tendency then, as now, was to borrow elements from the republican tradition but otherwise to move toward what became known as liberal models of democracy, with their emphasis on fair procedures, decentralization of power, and a political division of labor that placed relatively modest demands on ordinary citizens.

In the nineteenth century, Bentham’s thinking was likewise far removed from the presumed conventions of the “classical” model—so far removed, according to a recent study, as to be strangely resonant with the most cutting-edge empirical work on public opinion being produced today. Fred Cutler (1999, 322) observes that “Bentham’s theory of the Public Opinion Tribunal bears an uncanny resemblance to the current picture: a public of ‘cognitive misers’ who display rational igno-
rance, but who respond to ‘fire alarms’ with ‘moods’ through the miracle of aggregation, enabling them to retrospectively judge the performance of parties and leaders rather than the specifics of policy.”

Even Lord Bryce (1891), the patron muse of George Gallup’s pioneering work with the opinion survey, did not suggest that all the views of ordinary citizens be taken seriously in the democratic process. Instead, he felt that the moral sense of the community was what commoners could contribute most readily. It is perhaps no coincidence that the most famous Gallup question asks whether respondents approve of the president’s actions, rather than inviting them to tell the president what to do.

For most of recorded history the political ignorance of ordinary people was therefore more a “given” than a “crisis.” It was a natural condition rather than an immediate threat to the viability of political systems, and partly it was seen in this way because the health of political systems often was held to reside more in the hands of elites than the masses. Political ignorance was seen as a liability, to be sure, but it was a problem whose solution lay in proper institutional design, rather than something that invalidated the function or legitimacy of those institutions. The masses served mainly as a check to ensure that the elites didn’t fall too far out of line with community standards. Literacy rates were low in most countries, and compulsory education wasn’t introduced in the United States until the last half of the nineteenth century. The age-old problem was how to design a political system that safeguarded the interests of ordinary people, without requiring them to develop anything approaching what modern researchers call ideological constraint or political sophistication. Liberalism offered one solution by introducing the idea of representation in a division of political labor. Republicanism offered a different solution by limiting the scale of the polity and engaging ordinary citizens in an open discussion about problems of common interest.

It is therefore puzzling why so much of the empirical work on public opinion implicitly orients itself toward something like an early-twentieth-century version of Progressive liberalism. This position is certainly defensible, and finds a strong champion in John Dewey, among others. But while capital-P Progressivism has gone out of favor in much of the academy, it seems to thrive as a set of background assumptions in the mainstream of public-opinion research. In contrast to the diverse perspectives among political philosophers about the goals and responsibilities of different actors in democratic systems, let alone the
proper forms that democracies might take, there seem to be few important differences in the modal normative assumptions about democracy governing the mainstream of the public-opinion literature. There are, of course, broad areas of disagreement on questions of fact. But despite a vigorous debate in the empirical literature over measurement issues and conceptual refinements, there is strangely little discussion about the forms of democracy that give rise to particular concerns about the empirical characteristics of public opinion. One suspects that clearing away the normative underbrush of public-opinion research might reveal that what appear to be conceptual battles over rival ideas about public opinion are more fundamentally conceptual battles over rival visions of democracy.

II. DEAD ENDS

While theoretical diversions might have been avoided with closer attention to the main currents of political philosophy, there is also a second reason for opinion researchers to value philosophical inquiry about the role of public opinion. The project of refining empirical methods and developing a broad body of findings about the nature of public opinion has succeeded so thoroughly that further progress in some areas will depend on our ability to tackle seemingly intractable philosophical problems.

Two of these philosophical problems stem from the false starts detailed earlier, for although neither of them is broadly resonant with the extant literature on democratic theory, there are nonetheless good reasons to defend the importance of citizen policy preferences and worry about widespread public indifference toward politics (see esp. Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996). But if we remain convinced that mass policy preferences are normatively significant inputs for democratic institutions, as they may be, then—lacking a broad mandate for this position from the writings of political philosophers—it falls upon social scientists to explain why these preferences are important, and why they are more important than other types of opinions. Likewise, if we hold to the established view that an ill-informed citizenry is a liability for democratic politics, we still need to clarify what things people are supposed to know about politics, and what a lack of such knowledge tells us about the theory and practice of democracy.

There is no other way to address these normative questions than to engage in philosophical inquiry. The alternatives are silence, withdraw-
ing into relativism, or insisting that such questions demark the outer limits of fruitful inquiry. These are unappealing choices if we want to sustain important lines of research, but they are tempting nonetheless.

Recent work by James Kuklinski, Paul Quirk, and their colleagues (Kuklinski et al. 1998; Kuklinski and Quirk 2000) hints that many normative questions now confronting public-opinion research are so obscure as to be nearly impossible to settle. They ask, rhetorically, “How competent is competent enough?” (Kuklinski and Quirk 2000, 308). This question is not merely rhetorical: it is also philosophical, and worthy of a serious response. Remaining silent on this question leaves continued labors in the vineyards of public ignorance without defensible first principles or guiding assumptions.

Ship captains no longer fear plunging over the world’s edge just because their charts are incomplete. Neither must social scientists blindly insist that it’s “turtles all the way down” when it comes to explaining the genesis of their theoretical commitments. Political philosophy offers no easy answers, but it does furnish a set of scholarly tools for disassembling complex questions into more manageable parts.

Consider the question of which desirable traits might be required of citizens (or their opinions) for successful democratic rule. The lack of clear philosophical moorings for contemporary public-opinion research enabled well-meaning empiricists to propose a variety of theoretical rationales for their work. Their core concerns were usually assumed to have important standing in democratic theory, but rarely did they attempt to confirm this. Moreover, the various traits often held to be required of citizens were usually ascribed to no particular strand of democratic theory, as if they were warranted by some sort of philosophical consensus. In this empirically fertile but theoretically untilled soil, all manner of normative growth found easy but shallow root. Commenting on the wide range of presumptions about civic competence that sprang up as a result, Robert Weissberg (2001, 261) wryly observes that “the modus operandi informing [the literature on civic competence] is to welcome almost any trait momentarily attracting the researcher’s admiration.” And because “there is scarcely a trait imaginable that cannot, in some form or fashion, be speculatively deemed part of democratic competence” (ibid., 267), this literature has produced an extensive list of necessary or at least desirable traits for defining citizen competence.

Although it is usually the empiricists who chide philosophers for assuming too much of ordinary citizens, the expectations for democratic
citizenship that have grown out of the empirical literature seem far more varied and ambitious than is often found in the writings of normative theorists. This may stem in part from the centrality of methodological individualism to public-opinion research, which focuses scholarly attention on the ways individuals function within, and make sense of, democratic politics. Political philosophers also see individuals as the core units of democracy, but the scholarly “action” for normative theorists seems to be less at the level of individuals than in the relationships among individuals, groups, and larger social structures. Early notice of this disconnect between empiricists and philosophers was given by V. O. Key (1960) in his review of *The American Voter*, where he criticized behavioral researchers for turning away from what he saw as the central concerns of democratic politics to take up more easily studied but less momentous questions about the mental habits of individual citizens. To Key, as to normative philosophers more generally, the core problems of democratic practice lay in the institutions, processes, and outcomes of democratic systems more than in the ways that ordinary citizens made sense of them.

Among the broader set of traits commonly held by the empirical literature to be required by democratic theory, four stand out as nearly universally accepted premises: that citizens should be tolerant of difference, well informed about a wide range of important policy issues and public controversies, open to persuasion rather than fixed in their preferences, and willing to orient themselves toward the common good rather than narrow self-interest. Yet even though the empirical literature usually assumes that these requirements are standard elements of democratic theory, when we examine the canon of “classical” liberal theorists—which fit most easily with the representational structures of advanced democracies common today—we are hard-pressed to find such expectations being articulated by the likes of Hobbes, Locke, Madison, Bentham, or Mill (Minar 1960). Returning to the “radical” views of John Stuart Mill, his *On Liberty* presumes none of these traits for ordinary citizens. He argues just the opposite: that freedom of expression must be safeguarded precisely because of popular tendencies toward dogmatism, apathy, selfishness, and prejudice. Although he held out hope that popular participation in politics might develop a range of desirable traits, Mill never presumed these traits of ordinary citizens. His *Considerations on Representative Government* explicitly assigns possession of tolerance, political knowledge, and persuadability to the parliament of elected representatives rather than to ordinary citizens individually.
And far from thinking that ordinary citizens should orient themselves to collective needs, Mill did not expect even members of parliament to dispassionately regard the common good as more important than local concerns.

Tolerance, knowledge, persuadability, and a regard for the good of others may play an important role in some models of democracy, but less in liberalism than in republicanism. In the communitarian strains of republican theory, public involvement in political deliberation serves to refine individual preferences so that the best argument prevails and democracy becomes, to varying degrees, rule by popular consensus. A broad social distribution of these four desirable traits therefore becomes something like a precondition for successful democratic outcomes.

The four individual traits commonly supposed by public-opinion research to be necessary for democratic rule therefore resonate not with the mainstream of liberal theory running from Hobbes though Mill, but with the likes of Rousseau, who advocated a form of democracy that has been roundly criticized as too impractical, abstract, and idealistic for any but the smallest and most homogeneous of agrarian societies. Although it would warm Rousseau’s heart to see how thoroughly contemporary empirical work on public opinion seems to have embraced a republican view of the democratic citizen, it is telling how few of the empiricists contributing to this research would embrace the institutional implications for Rousseau’s vision of politics, based as it is on rejecting the possibility for political representation. Other theorists in the communitarian tradition have resigned themselves to the need for representation in modern societies (e.g., Barber 1984), but still hold high expectations for the political responsibilities that must be exercised by ordinary citizens. So while much public-opinion scholarship busies itself with revealing or explaining away the tendency for none of these desirable traits to be broadly distributed among ordinary citizens, the theories of democracy for which this set of expectations fits best—anchored as they are in the republican tradition—seem increasingly anachronistic as templates for effective governance in today’s complex societies.

Recognizing this philosophical disjuncture provides a way of backing out of the dead end posed by the “How competent is competent enough?” conundrum. Popular disengagement from politics arises in liberal theory (as in elite theories of democracy, e.g. Lippmann 1925; Schumpeter [1942] 1976) mainly as a chronic feature of human society that justifies representation (and, in earlier versions of liberalism, re-
stricted suffrage) rather than as a problem that hinders or threatens democratic rule. In this prominent strain of democratic theory, the question of civic competence comes up mainly in the context of deciding which kinds of people should be allowed to vote for political representatives. Thus, the answer suggested by liberal theory to the “How competent is competent enough?” question is merely, “Competent enough to cast a ballot.” Public-opinion research sometimes investigates voting competence (e.g., Bartels 1996; Althaus 2001; Lau and Redlawsk 2006), but the analytical leverage for doing so comes from assuming that informed preferences are the hallmark of “good” voting.3

In contrast, liberalism’s concern with voting competence seems to center on the capacity for sound moral judgment and a demonstrated investment in the well-being of society. This concern, rather than disquiet over lack of political knowledge, explains why democracies wait until people are adults before letting them vote. It also underlies the rationale for disenfranchising felons: not for their deficit in political expertise, but for their want of proper community spirit. The historical debate over suffrage rights therefore centered more on the sensibilities than the intelligence of voters; on whether proper judgment in voting required citizens to be literate, native-born, white, male, affluent, or property holders (e.g., Smith 1999).4 Beyond the question of suffrage restrictions, few liberal theorists seem to have any specific expectations about the political opinions held by ordinary citizens. The question of civic competence as it relates to the quality of political opinions rather than votes is therefore something of a non-starter within the mainstream currents of liberal democratic theory.

Digging down to expose the philosophical roots of these expectations for civic competence reveals that an apparent dead end is no barrier at all, at least for liberal theories. From whichever source public opinion researchers picked up these high expectations for citizen opinions, outside of the republican tradition it is difficult to tell what necessary conditions, if any, might be required of citizen opinions for successful democratic rule.

**New Opportunities**

If the problem of an ill-informed citizenry is a counterfeit crisis born of misunderstanding, and if scholarly momentum in some areas of the public-opinion literature is at risk of slowing from lack of engagement
with normative questions, in part it is because the founders of this literature wisely chose to tackle the fundamentals of method and analysis first. As Lazarsfeld (1957, 40) noted in the bright morning of the behavioral revolution, “progress in the clarity of formulations and the respect for evidence is often accompanied, at least temporarily, by an insensitivity to the broader visions and the more general concerns characteristic of an older tradition.” The analytical progress of the empirical literature has been so complete in the years since that further growth, in many areas, now depends on our ability to engage some of the same normative debates that occupied public-opinion scholars before the era of the sample survey.

Lazarsfeld (1957, 41) suggested three benefits likely to be produced by the joining of empirical research with political philosophy:

First, empirical development usually furnishes sharper conceptual tools that enable us to see the classics from a new vantage point: what was only dimly perceived before can now often be discerned with clarity and, as a result, new implications of all sorts can be brought to light. Secondly, the very act of inspecting this classical material brings to our attention ideas which might otherwise have been overlooked, either because of preoccupation with the work of the day, or because empirical researchers are likely to be guided too much by what is a manageable topic at the moment, rather than by what is an important issue. Finally, the classical tradition . . . is by no means over. . . . Theorizing itself can make progress, and the logic of empirical research can contribute to it.

These three hopes are as promising today as they were half a century ago. Yet there is a fourth, less apparent benefit from bringing political philosophy back into the study of public opinion. Lazarsfeld emphasized the potential for re-engagement with political philosophy to correct shortcomings within the empirical literature. But in today’s fragmented university, efficiencies gained through divisions of academic labor make it ever more difficult for scholars to communicate across lines of specialization, let alone to outside audiences. The public-opinion literature’s relevance to a host of important problems in democratic governance may be hard for outsiders to grasp until it is grounded in the common language of political philosophy.

Since at least the time of Plato, students of public opinion have been preoccupied with three basic questions: In what form should political institutions recognize public opinion? What characteristics should pub-
lic opinion possess? And what kind of political power should it be given? Empirical research, from the early twentieth century to the present, eagerly ran with the second question but punt ed the others to philosophers. This is an understandable choice, for if we presume that public opinion is what we get from sample surveys, then answering the second question becomes a precondition for addressing the third.

But research on the nature of public opinion appears politically sterile when it is isolated from larger questions about what public opinion is supposed to do for democracies. Its relevance to the big issues becomes obvious only when it is clearly connected to larger questions about the forms taken and democratic roles played by public opinion.

At one time the plan for empirical research on public opinion was to focus on all three of the core questions. Such early behavioralists as Berelson (1952) and Lazarsfeld (1957) promised to develop new insights into political theory by engaging in what might be called “basic” research on popular involvement in politics. This basic research—of which Converse’s ([1964] 2006) essay became a foundational part—would then provide raw material for refining old ideas in political philosophy and building new theories of democratic politics. Yet this founding ambition for a uniquely empirical democratic theory—a theory not merely informed by data, but derived inductively from empirical analysis—remains unrealized, perhaps because empirical research divested of its earlier normative concerns became so successful in capturing the imagination of a critical mass of social scientists that it lost the need to justify its relevance to outsiders.

How, then, to reconnect our research to these broader audiences, and to better anchor our work in the actual rather than assumed foundations of political thought? Doing so requires no social scientist to write like a philosopher, nor even to think like one. We need only orient our empirical findings to familiar signposts, and check our philosophical assumptions using reliable touchstones.

Signposts remind us where we are in the larger scheme of things without requiring us to stop and read the map. A useful starting list of signposts for public-opinion researchers—by no means comprehensive—might include the basic ideals or necessary conditions of democratic rule; the broad divisions among competing theories of democracy; the historical development of democratic institutions; the types and structures of political power; and the requirements or limitations of different conceptions of citizenship.

_The basic ideals or necessary conditions of democratic rule._ Ideals like liberty
matches the information in the file are signposting competing theories of democracy, such as the idea of political interests (Bartels 1990; Connolly 1993; Althaus 2003). As conceptual clarity arises from increasing specificity, signposting with basic ideals can be enhanced when abstract concepts are unpacked into sets of necessary conditions. For instance, Robert Dahl (1989, 108–31) lists five necessary criteria for evaluating a democratic polity: effective participation, voting equality at the decisive stage, enlightened understanding, control of the agenda, and inclusiveness. Bernard Manin (1997, 197) distills the essential conditions of democratic rule into four principles: “election of representatives at regular intervals, the partial independence of representatives, freedom of public opinion, and the making of decisions after trial by discussion.” Anchoring public-opinion research in the basic ideals or conditions of democratic rule may be an especially clear way of conveying the importance of this work to lay audiences, policy makers, and journalists.

Competing theories of democracy. Dahl (1956, 1) once observed that “there is no democratic theory—there are only democratic theories,” and keeping them straight can be a challenge. But the broad array of ideas about how best to realize democratic rule can be sorted out into families that share major themes, as David Held (1996) has done by synthesizing nine major models in democratic theory (cf. Terchek and Conte 2001). Simpler ways of signposting competing theories of democracy are also available. Among the most flexible is a basic distinction between liberalism, republicanism, and models that represent some hybrid of the two (e.g., Habermas 1996b).

The historical development of democratic institutions. Democratic institutions may require certain types of input from citizens or have particular informational needs that must be met to maximize the potential for fair political outcomes. As these institutional structures develop, so too should their responsiveness to different forms of citizen involvement or political pressure, along with their needs for particular kinds of information about citizen preferences (e.g., Bimber 2003). This perspective can be used to signpost public-opinion research by asking how optimally citizen input, in whatever form, matches the informational needs or representational structures of political institutions. If there is a dis-
juncture, what consequences are likely to follow for the conduct of democracy? One possible starting point is offered by Manin (1997), who traces the modern evolution of democracy through three stages—“parliamentarism,” “party democracy,” and “audience democracy”—each of which has different expectations for citizen involvement. Likewise, Habermas (1996a) sees public opinion serving two critical roles in modern liberal democracies: drawing attention to problems requiring political action, and pressuring governmental institutions to solve those problems. Merely signposting public-opinion research in such terms can convey the larger importance of empirical findings without engaging directly in normative analysis.

The types and structures of political power. Public opinion can be conceived as advancing or hindering the exercise of power in society, and the concept of power can be usefully signposted by reference either to its types or its hypothesized structures. Peter Bachrach and Morton S. Baratz’s celebrated 1962 article, “Two Faces of Power,” defined political power as both the ability to make decisions that affect others and the ability to choose which political problems are taken up by democratic institutions. A third face of power is that of defining the set of potential problems whose resolution might require a democratic solution (Lukes 1974). This third view is concerned with the power to obscure or define the political interests of particular groups. In addition to the forms that power can take, differing conceptions of the social structure of power relationships can also provide useful signposts for orienting the non-specialist. Empirical findings about public opinion suggest different implications when we conceive of that opinion as operating within a system in which individuals or groups use power intentionally—as the pluralists and elite theorists assume (e.g., Schumpeter [1942] 1976 and Dahl 1961)—than when we conceive of public opinion as shaping or reflecting impersonal structures of social or economic power, as the poststructuralists and neo-Marxians would have it (e.g., Miliband 1969 and Foucault 1979).5

The requirements or limitations of different conceptions of citizenship. A final category of signposts reflects inferences about the nature and function of public opinion drawn from different theories of democratic citizenship. Just as there is no unitary theory of democracy, neither is there a consensus view on the democratic citizen. There is instead a range of conceptions (Beiner 1995) that can be reduced to a basic dichotomy between “strong” and “weak” theories of citizenship (e.g., Thompson 1970, Barber 1984, and Hoffman 1998). These different conceptions of
citizenship are bound up in the debate over the superiority of representative as opposed to participatory forms of democracy (cf. Held 1996), and are often tied to different models of democracy. Higher expectations for citizen performance are typically entailed by theories of democracy rooted in the republican tradition, while lower expectations are the hallmark of liberalism. But this is not always so: some forms of Progressive liberalism held high expectations for citizen engagement (Schudson 1998), while older forms of republicanism limited citizen vigilance to matters of local rather than national or regional politics.

These five families of signposts improve our traction against false starts in public-opinion research. For instance, the mythic ideal of Lippmann’s “omnicompetent citizen” can be rightly rejected as a basis for concern about the mass public’s limited knowledge of things political. But this same concern easily can be sustained on different and more promising grounds: because basic knowledge about politics may be a necessary condition for citizen control of the political agenda, or for ensuring the autonomy of public opinion; because citizen ignorance reduces the efficiency and fairness of liberal institutions of democracy; because an ill-informed polity is less likely to identify important problems in need of government action, or to effectively pressure government to address those problems; because an ignorant public will tend to cede its authority to impersonal social structures, as well as to groups of elites who are better organized to operate the levers of governmental power; or because an out-of-touch citizenry is unlikely to discover and refine its underlying interests in a political problem, a weakness that strong theories of citizenship hope to remedy. These are just a handful of the possible justifications for concern over citizen ignorance that can be assembled from five categories of signposts marking core concerns in political philosophy. Similar justifications could be used to anchor normative concerns about the mass public’s low levels of ideological constraint.

But merely using signposts such as these will not ensure that public-opinion research is properly grounded in political philosophy. Normative signposts can appear authentic without being so, which is why touchstones are needed to ensure that a given signpost is a valid point of reference in the philosophical literature.

The word touchstone comes from the use of flat, black rocks to test the purity of seemingly precious metals. A known sample of the metal in question would be rubbed on the touchstone and its color compared to a rubbing from a suspect piece of gold or silver. Once the relative
purity of the suspect metal was thereby established, its proper value became easy to assess. Conceptual touchstones ensure that signposts represent particular theories rather than generic concepts. Just as eyebrows would be raised at the scholar who aims to extend concepts like “political efficacy” and “party identification” without reference to the body of prior research that gives those terms definite meaning, so also should we insist that the use of concepts from political philosophy be properly documented. Touchstones of value to the public-opinion researcher identify theoretical signposts with specific authors or pieces of writing. The more closely a philosophical concept can be associated with a particular writer or primary source, the “purer” it is likely to be, where purity is understood as having legitimate roots in the discourse of political philosophers.

Reconnecting empirical public-opinion research to political philosophy not only has the potential to clarify how important this research is to broader questions of concern to many, but also to draw this research forward in new directions. As Lazarsfeld pointed out, a closer acquaintance with political philosophy will naturally suggest new hypotheses for empirical investigation. To give just one example, the venerable literature on opinion/policy congruence (summarized in Page 1994) has been a centerpiece of public opinion research since the early 1960s (following Miller and Stokes 1963). This literature addresses basic questions of political representation, but the philosophical context for understanding representation has been largely neglected in this line of work (for exceptions, see Jacobs and Shapiro 1994 and 2000). As a consequence, the empirical literature has developed a conception of congruence or responsiveness defined narrowly in terms of mass policy preferences. As the ultimate importance of such preferences is open to question within the main currents of democratic theory, resolving this ambiguity may prove an important and promising line of normative inquiry for public-opinion researchers.

Aside from exploring and developing a clearer normative framework for this line of empirical research, a different set of research questions would emerge if the prevailing view of congruence were broadened to square more neatly with some of the common roles proposed for citizen preferences in a range of democratic theories. Congruence acquires whole new dimensions when citizen input takes the form not just of expressing policy preferences that representatives can choose to legislate or ignore, but of deciding the ends of politics, identifying problems requiring political action, and delimiting the core values that should orga-
nize political decision making. Thinking about opinion/policy congruence in any of these terms would require developing new instrumentation for survey research, and perhaps even new methods for operationalizing citizen input. For instance, aside from the dubious “most important problem” survey question and asking subjects to rank-order issues presented to them in a short list, we currently have no clear way of assessing the mass public’s agenda of concerns (Shanks 1999), and thus no obvious way to compare its political priorities with the issue agenda of its representative institutions.

* * *

It may be tempting for social scientists doing public opinion research to leave the work of political philosophy to others, or to dismiss it as an unreliable mode of inquiry. After all, the critic might ask, has even one definite conclusion about politics been produced by some 2,500 years of philosophical inquiry?

But empirical stoicism in public opinion research is no virtue, because inattention to normative scholarship invites further false starts and dead ends. Public-opinion research runs the risk of addressing itself to chimerical problems when it ignores larger questions of how and why democracies are supposed to work. Purely empirical research soon becomes unable to articulate first principles that must be stated and defended to give that research meaning. Limiting the apparent usefulness of political philosophy to post-hoc reflection about larger implications of our empirical findings leaves us less able to recognize the danger of unobserved premises. Our empirical paradigms not only have implications for, but also are constructed from, particular strands of democratic thought.

Typically, we think of the danger of unobserved premises as the “blind men and the elephant” problem. The tale is a familiar one: three blind men try to describe an elephant by feeling it, and each makes contact with a different part: the trunk, the tail, and a leg. They conclude, in turn, that an elephant is like a snake, a rope, and a tree. The unobserved premise is that each has a complete picture of the whole. In the context of public opinion research it may be more appropriate to think of this as the “blind elephants and the man” problem. As the story goes, three blind elephants ponder what human beings are like, and they decide to figure this out by feeling one. After chasing down the first luckless person they find and using their large elephant feet to not-
so-delicately probe his various parts, they unanimously conclude with utter certainty that human beings are flat.

The elephants’ unobserved premise is that the analytical strategies available to them are suitable for investigating the question of interest. The analytical strategies of public-opinion research may also have more flattening power than we recognize, and because of this we risk losing sight of normative assumptions that influence how we conceive of the very problems we seek to understand. It may be that a better appreciation of democratic theory could put public-opinion research onto more solid philosophical ground and into a better position to communicate its unique insights for the democratic project. Continuing otherwise ensures that our research will leave not half the impression that a clearer statement of its true value to democratic politics would have it produce.