

Some Observations on Mass Beliefs in the U.S. and Georgia

Tamar SHIOSHVILI *

Abstract

Debates about the political abilities of the public remain one of the major controversies in political behavior research. This controversy implies normative presumptions about what level of sophistication is required for democracies to achieve their political ideals. For citizen politics to be purposeful, the electorate must have at least a basic level of political skills. Political attention is also very important sign of the public's political skills. Reflecting and reinforcing the general development of cognitive mobilization, interest in politics and government affairs has increases in the U.S. and Georgia as well. Interest in specific election may vary from campaign to campaign, but statistics suggest a trend of increasing politicization.

More people seem to be spreading reliance on social group and partisan cues as a basis of voting.

The present level of issues voting is generally higher than during earlier periods.

Keywords: supercitizen, political sophistication, democratic, electorate, politicization, citizenry

Introduction

Any consideration of citizen politics is normally based on presumptions about the political abilities of the electorate – the public's level of awareness, perception and regard in political matters. For voters to make significant decisions, they must understand the alternatives on which they are deciding. Citizens also must have sufficient information of the operation of political system if they want to impact and control the actions of their representatives. It is considered, that for citizen politics to be determined, the electorate must have some basic level of political skills. With what depth of knowledge and deductions are opinions held? Do survey answers represent reasonable evaluations of the issues or weak judgments if individuals are faced by an interviewer in front of their house? It is not unusual to see public described as uninformed, especially when public opinion conflicts with the speaker's own viewpoints? Can we evaluate the assets of either position based on the pragmatic opinion surveys?

Discussion about the political competence of the public continues to be one of the major disputable topics in political behavior research. The dispute implicates presumptions what level of sophistication is demanded for democracies to reach their ideals

I. The Supercitizen

Political theorists have long believed that democracy was functioning only when the public had a high level of political information. Alexis de Tocqueville, (Rayan, 1994, p. 46) John Stuart Mill (Berman, 2007, p. 284) and others considered this public characteristic as crucial for a successful democratic system. Most theorists later were insisting that the citizenry should support the political system and share democratic ideals such as: pluralism, free expression, and minority rights. Otherwise, an uninformed electorate might be controlled by dishonest elites. Obviously these theorists postulated a supercitizen model: The public must be an apotheosis of civic rectitude for democracy to survive.

In the last decade of the twentieth century, a wave of democratization expanded across the globe. The citizens of Eastern Europe, South Africa, and several East Asian nations rose up against their authoritarian governments. The Soviet empire dissolved, and millions of citizens were enjoying their new democracies. Among them was Georgia.

In the United States this decade also brought unparalleled opulence and economic prosperity. The United States experienced its longest period of economic growth in peacetime. Crime rates dropped and progress was made on many policy areas. This was a positive time for Western democ-

* Prof. Dr., Faculty of Education and Humanities, International Black Sea University, Tbilisi, Georgia,
E-mail: tshioshvili@ibsu.edu.ge

racy, winning after the Cold War.

Notwithstanding these signs of progress, there are growing signs that the citizens of these settled democracies have become intensively critical of the politicians, political parties, and political institutions that form the basics of the democratic process (Norris, 1996, Pharr & Putnam, 2000). The infirmness is perhaps more vivid and surprising in the United States, starting with the crises and political scandals of the 1960s and 1970s – Vietnam, urban unrest, and Watergate-Americans' trusts in their politicians plunged lower. Jimmy Carter in 1979 warned Americans that declining public confidence "was fundamental threat to American democracy". Trust in government partially recovered during the first Reagan administration as the president tried to introduce a new sense of political purpose and renew the political spirit with uplifting references to "a new morning in America". By the end of the Reagan/Bush administrations, however, public skepticism was fueled by new crises and new scandals.

Anxiety about the health of democracy or partisan politics is a general feature of political science. There was an important debate about nation's postwar goals during the Eisenhower administration, and John Kennedy asked Americans to renew their commitment to state and nation (Muller, 1999, chapter 7).

The most noteworthy academic study is "The Crisis of Democracy" (Crozier & Huntington, 1975) in which Michel Crozier, Samuel Huntington and Yoji Watanuki (1975) nearly predicated democracy's death. Fortunately, the passage of time has shown that the forecast of Crozier was wrong, but now there are new courses for concern among those who cherish democracy. A supportive political culture is often considered a requirement for an effective democracy (Almond & Verba, 1963).

II. The Unsophisticated Citizen

In contrast to the classic images of democratic theory, before World War II surveys depicted an unflattering picture of the American public. Political sophistication was far from the supercitizen model. For most people, political interest and involvement hardly extended beyond casting an occasional vote in national or local elections. Besides, Americans evidently brought little understanding to their participation in politics. It was not clear that people based their voting decisions on rational evaluations of candidates and their issue positions.

What was happening in Soviet Georgia until dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991? With its beautiful scenery, delicious cuisine and ancient winemaking tradition, Georgia was called the jewel of the Soviet Union. Georgia which during Soviet times held the fourth place after the Baltic republics for high living standards - a contrast with today's economic problems. Notwithstanding this relative prosperity, the authoritarian, corrupt Soviet regime had brought distortion in every sphere. Masses of citizens were passive and unhappy recipients of leaders' policies. Citizens voted without real involvement in the election, some governmental officials would cast ballots instead of people. The citizens were not informed on the details of the campaign, in other sense the voters were not rational. This had been a habitual procedure during elections until 1991 when the first democratic elections were held and the first president was elected in Georgia. But the Georgian society was in flux. It was ex-

periencing a massive sociological and cultural transformation. During this period of rapid change, Georgians have come upon undesirable developments not anticipated when we embarked on what appeared to be a glorious road to economic and political progress. People's patterns of living altered. The earlier pillars of psychological and community security that underpinned the family unit, longstanding agrarian communities, have often been weakened in the midst of a significant period of transition, when the Soviet legacy was still present in the mentality of many citizens. So the newly fledged democracy was rather volatile and the public didn't have high enough degree of political sophistication and the government followed the authoritarian trend, that which was followed by massive protests when in 2003 the parliamentary elections were rigged again. This was when the "Rose Revolution" happened. Public political socialization was strengthening. Elections to Parliament took place on November 2, 2003. The voting was troubled by some polling stations opening late, there were complaints of people, who wanted to vote and their names were not on registration lists, one polling station was closed because of failure to fulfill regulations. Georgians rejected the result of elections. Thousands of Georgians went out into the streets of the capital, Tbilisi to protest at the falsification of election results by the authorities.

Smaller scale protests also took place in other cities of Georgia: Zugdidi, Gori, Zestaphoni. Among others: "anti-governmental protests were held in several provincial towns. Demonstrators numbering between 300 and 500 gathered in the cities of Rustavi, Akhaltsikhe, Poti, Telavi, Zestaponi, Zugdidi, Abasha and Samtredia." New presidential elections were held on January 4, 2004 and new parliamentary elections for the proportional party list were held in March, 2004.

Georgia was a corrupted country then, but it had young intellectual resources and an independent mass media, promising enough to speed up the recovery process and find efficient ways to fight corruption. In reality, a lot of democratic reforms were carried out after 2003.

However, people's economic conditions didn't improve and there were drawbacks in the judicial system. Georgia's history since independence from the USSR in 1991 has been a roller-coaster of exaggerated hopes placed in a political savior, followed by disillusionment (Mchedlishvili, 2013). Unsophisticated Georgian citizens are becoming quite unflattering. This was proved by the most democratic elections ever held in Georgia in October 13, 2012, unprecedented number of Georgians took part in parliamentary elections to fix their position to elect new representatives.

Nevertheless, certain requirements commonly assumed for the successful operation of democracy are not met by the behavior of the "average" citizen. Many vote without real involvement in the election, the citizens are not highly informed on the details of the campaign.

Angus Campbell documented similar understanding by the American electorate in "American Votes" (Campbell, 1960).

In an essay on mass belief systems, Philip Converse (1964) worked out the criteria for measuring political sophistication. He presumes there should be a basic structure at the core of individual political beliefs.

This structure can be provided by the framework of liberalism/conservatism. Additionally, there should be constraint

between individual issue positions. Constraint is evaluated by the connection between specific issue positions and core beliefs and by interrelationship among issues. Viewpoints on one issue should be ideologically (at least logically) consonant with other beliefs. According Converse, the issue opinions should be more or less stable over time so that voters' beliefs consistently guide their behavior. The outcome should be a tightly structured system of beliefs. After testing this model, Converse came to the conclusion that Americans turned out to be unsatisfactory on most of these criteria. First, public opinion obviously lacked a general ideological structure. Most persons do not evaluate political phenomenon in ideological terms, such as liberalism/conservatism or capitalism/socialism. Just tenth of the American public used ideological concepts in building up their belief system. Second, apparently there was a weak relationship between issues that are thought to be connected. For example, voters thought taxes were too high, although supported increases in spending for many specific government programs. Third issue beliefs were not firm over time. Checking of the same group of people interviewed during three elections found that the opinions of many people seemed to vary inconsistently. Obviously in many issues of longstanding political concern, many voters lack informed opinions. "The American Voter" concluded that the electorate is almost completely unable to judge the rationality of government actions; knowing little of the particular policies and what has led to them, the mass electorate is not able either to appraise its goals or the appropriateness of the means chosen to secure these goals (Campbell, 1960, p. 543).

This research was followed by a number of analyses revealing that many people could not name their elected representatives, were unfamiliar with the institutions of government, and did not understand the strategy of the political process. Furthermore, later research convinces that little has changed three decades later (Carpini & Keeter, 1996).

The picture of unsophisticated citizens also exists in Western European countries, where political involvement is lower than in the United States. Political involvement was lower in France than in the United States, despite the turbulent nature of the French party system. French voters also lacked well-formulated viewpoints on the urgent issues (Converse & Pierce, 1986, Ch. 7). Similar indication appeared from surveys of the British public (Butler & Stokes, 1969). For example, 60 percent of Britons did not recognize the terms Left and Right, applying to politics; weak linkage between opinions on related issues and inordinate opinion instability over time.

III. Elitist Theory of Democracy

Having discovered that most citizens fail to meet the demand of classic democratic theory, political scientists encountered a paradox. Most citizens are not "good" democratic citizens, and yet democracies such as the United States and Great Britain have existed for generations. Time by time, an elitist theory of democracy developed as scholars tried to analyze these surveys in a positive light. (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, & McPhee, 1954). The new theory opposed that democratic politics might prove unpracticable if every person is active on every issues at all times. These scholars suggested though the model citizen "is not the active citizen; he is the potentially active citizen" (Almond & Verba, 1963, p. 347) and they argued that people must believe that they can influence the government and must be willing to make an effort

if the issues is sufficiently important. However, few will realize this potential. This balance between action and potential probably assured that political elites had enough freedom to make necessary decisions, while keeping the public interest in mind. Another argument of the elitist theory stresses the heterogeneity of the public: "Some people are and should be highly interested in politics, but not everyone is or needs to be" (Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and Mc Phee, 1954, p. 315). From this point of view the responsiveness of the political system is assured by a small core of active citizens and political elites, leaving the rest of the public uninformed and uninvolved. This mix between involved and indifferent voters assures the stability and flexibility of democratic systems.

The theory claims that "the democratic citizen... must be active, yet passive; involved, yet not too involved; influential, yet deferential" (Almond and Verba, 1963, pp. 478-479). Critics of the public Thomas Dye and Harmon Ziegler claimed: The survival of democracy depends upon the commitment of elites to democratic ideals rather than upon broad support for democracy by the masses. Political apathy and nonparticipation among the masses contribute to the survival of democracy (Dye & Ziegler, 1970, p. 328).

When the public began to dispute political elites during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s, these political scientists cautioned that democracy required a public of followers who would not question political elites too expansively. The elitist theory probably overlooks the complexities of the democratic process and takes an unsophisticated view, ignoring the inconsistencies among political elites. Members of the U.S. Congress habitually approve formal budget limits and then act to avoid these limits in the next legislation. Such inconsistencies in their behavior are treated as examples of complexity of politics; for the public these models are signs of their lack of sophistication.

IV. Reconsideration of Political Sophistication

Americans have challenging attitude towards traditional descriptions of an unsophisticated electorate. The traits of the public in advanced industrial democracies improved considerably during the second half of the twentieth century. The public's political skills – education, media exposure, political awareness are dramatically increased more likely after 1950s. The value of acquiring information about politics has decreased. The public's ability to process political information has increased.

More citizens now have the political resources and skills to cope with the ramification of politics and reach their own political decisions.

The public's access to information has boosted. In older times the average citizen had lack of information. Reading newspapers or magazines is time-consuming, particularly for an electorate with limited education. Today, there is an unlimited variety of Political news. The enlargement of the mass media, especially television is vivid example of this. In 1952 about 51 percent of the electorate using television news as an information source rose to 90 percent in 1960. The present American nightly half-hour national network news program began in 1963. Since then as technology and viewer interest have increased, today news reporting is instant and occurs on world-wide scale. People have access to news on a twenty-four-hour-a-day basis; CNN affords a

rich media environment. As a result, television is now the primary information source for Western publics. The high ranking for television does not mean that other media are not used. Opinion surveys generally find that large majorities of the public regularly watch television, read newspapers and magazines, and hear news on the radio mostly while driving. Computer is another frequently used source for gathering information especially for younger generation. Hence electorate has access to vast media sources that would have been unimaginable a generation ago. These expansions in the quantity and quality of political information provided by the media improves public awareness of political affairs.

It should be mentioned that political scientists are divided in whether the enlargement of television as a news source is a positive or negative for the democratic process. Some political scientists argue that the media belittles information, underlining entertainments and drama over essence, creating a negative atmosphere of opinion (Patterson, 1993, Swanson & Mancini, 1996). These concerns might be justified by the fact that television does have limits. On the other hand, television can provide a greater understanding of politics by giving chance to watch legislative discussions, to see candidates as they campaign, and to get exposed to history firsthand. Watching an important parliamentary debate on television or watching the presidential inauguration live give citizens a direct contact to their government and a better understanding of how democracy work. Thus television has great positive and negative impact, and the objective of democratic policy should be to magnify the benefits.

In Georgia the case was different. Although the citizens had television in 1960s, the media were not free. The communist system censored every kind of media, television programs, the print media very strictly. The people were not getting the true information about politics and government, the curtain was drawn before the citizens, and it lasted till 1990s.

In addition to the media, a lot of political information is available today through internet, smartphones and social media. Governments now have a great role in society, and their performance of this role is important political information.

The increase of political information maintains an opportunity to the citizenry, but the question is: how the public processes and evaluates the information. So, it is crucial that the public's political skills also boost.

The most vivid change in political skills is provided by educational levels. Advanced industrial societies require a more educated and technically sophisticated electorate, and modern opulence has provided the funding for an expanded educational system. The U.S. university enrollments grew tremendously during the latter half of the twentieth century. By the 1990s graduate degrees were almost as common as bachelor degrees were in mid-century. These trends have steadily raised the educational level of contemporary electorates. Half of the 1948 American electorate had a primary education or less, and only a tenth had some college education. By 2000 the portion of the electorate with some college education outnumbered voters with only primary education by a ten-to-one ratio, and those with some college education made up almost two-thirds of the electorate. Samuel Popkin (1991, p. 36) suggests that rising educational level increases the breadth of citizens' political interests, even if they do not raise overall levels of institutional knowledge or issue constraints by the same amount.

In Georgia the quest for higher education greatly intensified after World War II. It became necessary to have a higher education diploma for "white collar" jobs. However, the curriculums were overloaded with Communist Party of the Soviet Union history courses that hindered the democratic political thought of citizens. In addition there was severely limited freedom of expression in the country as well as in all socialist republics. There was samizdat, Kostava and Gamsakhurdia, etc. did publish although they were persecuted, there were public demonstrations, e.g. the successful April 1978 demonstration against demotion of the Georgian language. In 1990s the free media emerged, and quite a number of Georgians managed to go abroad to get undergraduate or graduate education. The newly fledged democratic elements were being replenished by the free ideas of a young generation returning from abroad.

IV. Conclusion

Thus, better-educated individuals come closer to the classic model of ideologically informed citizens and are more intelligent in their behavior. A doubling of the public's educational level may not double the level of political sophistication, but some expansion should occur. Contemporary electorates are vividly the most educated in the long as well as in the young history of democracies, and this should contribute toward making a more sophisticated electorate and a new style of citizen politics.

References

- Almond, G. & Verba, S. (1963). *The Civil Culture*. Princeton, N. Y.: Princeton University Press.
- Berlson, B., Lazarsfeld, P., & McPhee, W. (1954). *Voting*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Berman, L. & Murphy, B. A. (2007). *Approaching Democracy*. U.S.A.: New Jersey.
- Butler, D. & Stokes, D. (1969). *Political Change in Britain*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Campbell, A. (1960). *The American Votes*. New York: Wiley.
- Carpini, D. M. & Keeter, S. (1996). *What Americans Know about Politics and Why it Matters*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press
- Converse, P. & Pierce, R. (1986). *Representation in France*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Converse, P. (1994). The nature of belief systems in mass public. In 'Ideology and Discontent', edited by D. Apter. New York: Free Press.
- Crozier, M. & Huntington, S. (1975). *The Crises of Democracy*. New York: New York University Press.
- Mchedlishvili, G. (2013). Robert Bosch Fellow at the Chatham House Russia and Eurasia Programme. Bidzina Ivanishvili is trying to cure Georgia's Messiah complex. *The World Today*, 69 (8/9).
- Muller, J. (1999). *Capitalism, Democracy, and Ralph's Pretty Good Grocery*. Princeton, N.Y.: Princeton University Press.
- Patterson, T. (1993). *Out of Order*. New York: Knopf. Swan-

son, D. & Mancini, P. eds. (1996). "Politics, Media, and Modern democracy". Westport, Conn.: Praeger.

Pharr, S. & Putnam, R. eds. (2000). *Disaffected Democracies: What's Troubling the Trilateral Democracies*. Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press.

Pippa, N. ed. (1999). *Critical Citizens: Global Support for Democratic Governance*. Oxford, U.K.: Oxford University Press.

Popkin, S. (1991). *The Reasoning Voter*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rayan, A. (1994). *Democracy in America*. Alexis De Tocqueville. The United States: New York.