

# **A REVIEW OF PUBLIC OPINION & KNOWLEDGE PROCESSING ABOUT POLITICS**

**MU MVZ 449  
Spring 2010  
Dave McCuan  
Sonoma State University**

Public opinion is the distribution of preferences on matters of general relevance to government within a specified population.

V.O. Key emphasizes that public opinion refers to the opinions of private citizens government finds it prudent to heed, but Citrin (who is at UC Berkeley) prefers to leave open the question of the influence of opinion. There also is the idea of “latent opinion” which is a tendency to react in a particular way that gets expressed when events or government actions occur.

Opinions have objects, so to hold an opinion its object must have some meaning to the opinion-holder. Opinions have direction, but also differ in their intensity, stability, informational backing, and centrality. These attributes tend to go together empirically—i.e. intense opinions are more stable. Certain opinions are more “pregnant,” i.e. more likely to lead to action and those are the opinions government is more likely to heed as opinions “grow.”

Not everyone holds opinions on all issues, so the total population, e.g. electorate—are potential opinion-holders. In reality, the potential public is stratified by knowledge, interest, having a definite opinion, and intensity. So, it is wise to think of issue publics...from one issue to the next the number of people knowing, caring, feeling intense, and so forth may vary.

Preferences are based on “valenced beliefs” or considerations. This means that you can hold the same opinion as someone else but for different reasons.

Finally, opinion formation involves two steps—reception and acceptance. Reception involves exposure and attention and cannot be assumed. Acceptance is impeded by consistency bias, the preference to believe messages that are consistent with our prior opinions, especially if those are central and intense. Sampling is added to this model (R-A-S) by Zaller (UCLA) in his work.