

## ***The Public Opinion Group 1997-1998***

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When I submitted the proposal for a year at the CAS I optimistically chose the title “The Foundations of Public Opinion” for the research that we planned to do. I thought that a research group at a center for advanced study needed an ambitious agenda. Looking back at what we actually did during the twelve months, it seems fair to say that we did not quite fulfill all the goals that we set out to achieve. However, we definitely made some progress in important areas of research and initiated further collaborative work that has matured in the years after the CAS.

The study of public opinion is a vast field that is academic as well as applied. We kept the applied aspect somewhat in the background, although on occasions we supplied comments and interpretations to the mass media on current events in Norwegian politics. Among our contributions was a major presentation to the government’s Values Commission on trends in social, political, and moral values in Norway. Although I thought at the time that we did an excellent job, our contribution did not save the Commission from its fate of becoming an arena for infights between well-articulated pressure groups and professional opinion makers, and not a forum for the creation of a new value consensus in society.

On the strictly scholarly front the work progressed on four research questions: The development of new models to explain the impact of issue opinion on electoral behavior, the study of causes of shifts in opinion, the investigation of the interaction between elites and mass in the formation of opinion, and the search for explanations of value differences between countries.

### *Issues*

In 1957 Anthony Downs published what was to become a classic study of voting behavior. The book, *An Economic Theory of Democracy*, argued that parties should move to the political center if they wanted to win elections. His theory was developed for the two-party system of the United States. In this system, Downs argued, parties would tend to moderate their views and become quite like each other in ideological terms. The battle was always for the voter in the middle. In an influential article published in 1989, George Rabinowitz and Stuart Elaine Macdonald launched a competing theory. They argued that parties did not move to the center, but kept distinct ideological profiles to make the voters aware of what was unique and special about each party. According to this directional theory a voter was more likely to form a favorable impression of a party if the party and the voter were on the same side of a political issue, and both took an intense, and non-centrist, position on the issue. Rabinowitz and Macdonald showed that their directional theory had empirical support in the United States. The next step of their work was to develop the theory for multiparty systems. They chose Norway as their main case, and have continued their work on Norwegian elections for more than ten years, including contributions to the CAS public opinion group. It probably comes as no surprise that parties in Norway to an even stronger degree than parties in the United States operate under the logic of the directional model. The powerful Rokkan-Valen model argues that each party commands a set of core issues. Success at an election will depend on the ability of the party to put its core issues at the top of the voters’ agenda. Two examples will suffice. In 1993 the question whether Norway should join the European Union dominated the election campaign. The Center party had the most intense position against membership and was rewarded with a record high vote at the election. In 1997 the EU question was not on the political agenda, and the Center party lost about the same number of

votes that the party had gained at the preceding election. The long-term decline of support for the Liberals (Venstre) can be explained by the fact that the party has not found new core issues to replace the issues that were either lost through the major victories of the party - the establishment of an independent and democratic nation; or taken over by other parties as the introduction of proportional representation in 1921 opened up the way for an agrarian party, and, later, a specialized religious party.

#### *Causes of shift in opinion*

Public opinion is normally responsive to economic conditions. When times are good, citizens tend to form favorable impressions of government. When economic fortunes decline, voters become more negative to government. Voters' trust in politicians and political institutions follows this logic. In her work based on data from EU countries, Beate Huseby shows that the economic effect is asymmetrical. The effect of negative evaluations is much stronger than the corresponding effect of positive assessments. It is easier for trust to decline than to improve as a consequence of changes in the economy. In a major extension of previous work, Huseby demonstrates that voters' evaluations of government performance on the environment and in social policy (care for the elderly and public health) have similar effects to economic evaluations. The explanation for this is that all policy fields – the economy, the environment, and the welfare state – constitute arenas where voters are in consensus about goals. They will then reward or punish government on the basis of performance and less on assessments of which means governments use to deliver the goods.

#### *Mass-elite interaction*

Can political elites influence the formation of opinion among citizens? This question goes to the heart of democratic theory. Most scholars probably take the position that the strongest flow of opinion should go from mass to elites, and not the other way. In some intriguing research, Sören Holmberg concludes that opinion formation in Sweden is strongly top-down, voters tend to follow political leaders to a higher degree than leaders adapt to the political views of the voters. Fortunately, the studies by Valen and Narud, fail to corroborate the Swedish results for political representation in Norway. But Norway is not free from the impact of elites.

In contrast to parliamentary elections some theorists see referendums as a political institution that is more favorable for the direct influence of mass over elites. It is fair to say that the two Norwegian referendums on membership of the EU can be interpreted in this way as at both time points, and especially in 1972, most parties and other elite groups, including the Cabinet, were for membership while the majority of voters said no. A closer look at the opinion dynamics of the referendum campaign reveals, however, that elites had considerable power in moving mass opinion. Research by Anders Todal Jenssen and collaborators shows that when voters were in conflict with the party they supported, voters were more likely to change their position on EU membership than to change party. This shows that parties had persuasion power in the referendum campaign.

#### *Making sense of comparative opinion*

Norway is often portrayed as a country where equality is dominant. Studies of income equality and other objective indicators give support to the equality proposition. But research on comparative public opinion has at best given mixed support for the proposition. On a number of studies the Norwegian public is not strikingly egalitarian in value preferences when compared with other countries. In an attempt to solve the puzzle, Toril Aalberg makes a distinction between terminal and instrumental values of equality. Terminal values state the

absolute goals for how much equality one prefers, while instrumental values tap into the support for the means to achieve the goals. Based on an extensive analysis of comparative survey data Aalberg finds that Norway is on top or close to the top when it comes to public support for egalitarian goals, for example about how large differences in pay between occupations are acceptable. When it comes to support for taxation and other means to achieve egalitarian goals, Norway places itself in the middle of the comparative rankings. The interpretation is that the public has reacted against the egalitarian policies and regulations that have been used to enforce equality. Means are not as popular as goals.

On a concluding note I am especially proud that the youngest members of the group have had success in their post-CAS years. Toril Aalberg and Beate Huseby both received the NSD Stein Rokkan Prize for their dissertations, and Toril was also awarded the Royal Norwegian Society of Sciences and Letters Lykke Prize for promising scholars below the age of thirty. I am quite confident - although I cannot scientifically prove it - that the year in Oslo contributed to this achievement.