PART I

THEORY AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT

I

The Generalized Other:

SOCIAL INFLUENCE IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN POLITICS

> Reality . . . has anyway long ceased to be what it was for my grandmother, who lived in a Moravian village and still knew everything through her own experience: how bread is baked, how a house is built, how a pig is slaughtered and the meat is smoked, what quilts are made of, what the priests and the schoolteacher think about the world; she met the whole village every day and knew how many murders were committed in the country over the last ten years; she had, so to speak, personal control over reality, and nobody could fool her by maintaining that Moravian agriculture was thriving when people at home had nothing to eat. My Paris neighbor spends his time in an office, where he sits for eight hours facing an office colleague, then he sits in his car and drives home, turns on the TV, and when the announcer informs him that in the latest public opinion poll the majority of Frenchmen voted their country the safest in Europe (I recently read such a report), he is overjoyed and opens a bottle of champagne without ever learning that three thefts and two murders were committed on his street that very day. . . . [S]ince for contemporary man reality is a continent visited less and less often and, besides, justifiably disliked, the findings of polls have become a kind of higher reality, or to put it differently: they have become the truth.
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> Milan Kundera, *Immortality* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1991), p. 115

The kind of world inhabited by Kundera's grandmother has ceased to exist for most citizens of advanced industrialized democracies. For better or worse, much of what people know about the world no longer comes to them through personal experience. Mass feedback mechanisms such as public opinion polls are just one of many factors that have accelerated this trend. This book is about the changes that have led to this state of affairs and the implications that they have for social influences on political attitudes and behaviors.

The basic premise of the book is that an increasingly important force in contemporary political life involves what may be termed "impersonal influence"; that is, influence that derives from people's perceptions of others' attitudes, beliefs, or experiences. "Others" in this case refers not to the close friends and acquaintances that concerned the authors of classics such as *The People's Choice* and *Personal Influence*, but rather to the anonymous "others" outside an individual's realm of personal contacts. For example, impersonal influence takes place when the outcomes of early primaries or caucuses affect attitudes toward candidates in later primaries as they did for Gary Hart in 1984 (Bartels 1988; Brady and Johnston 1987). Likewise, when people vote on the basis of their perceptions of how the nation as a whole is faring economically rather than on their own pocketbooks, they are also being influenced by perceptions of impersonal others (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).[1] And when people demand that greater public resources be directed at a problem like violent crime based on their perceptions that others are increasingly victimized even though they themselves are not, impersonal influence also may be said to occur.

Impersonal influence is worthy of attention both from the standpoint of its impact on contemporary American politics and because of its potential to expand the boundaries of our understanding of social influence processes and media's relation to them. This type of influence is deemed "impersonal" because it is brought about by information about the attitudes, beliefs or experiences of collectives outside of an individual's personal life space. In other words, impersonal influence is not about the direct persuasive influence of media messages that attempt to promote one viewpoint over another; it is strictly concerned with the capacity for presentations of collective opinion or experience to trigger social influence processes. The perceptions of mass collectives that initiate this type of influence tend to originate with media, though this need not necessarily be the case.[2] But media content is particularly well suited to serving as a credible channel of information about large-scale collec-

1 "Impersonal" is not meant to connote others who are cold or aloof, but rather collective others with whom one has no personal association.

2 The channel through which information reaches a person (interpersonal communication versus mass media) is obviously distinguishable from the kind of information transmitted (about individuals or collectives). As noted, my focus is on information about the state of mass collectives, regardless of whether that information reaches a person directly, via secondary transmission of mediated information, or in some other fashion. Nonetheless, media tend to be the most important conduit for information about mass collectives, while interpersonal communication conveys the bulk of information that is exchanged about individuals. As discussed in Chapter 2, contemporary media tend to report much less news about personally identified individuals, except when they serve as exemplars of some larger social problem.

tives. Although mediated channels lack the trustworthiness that would make them valued sources of opinions on many matters, they possess a degree of expertise in matters beyond the realm of people's personal experiences that makes them seem far more reliable as sources of information about the larger world in which we live.

Mass media undoubtedly facilitate the influence of anonymous others by devoting considerable time and attention to portraying trends in, and states of, mass opinion and experience. But the concern with social influence has been investigated most thoroughly at the level of personal acquaintances and group influence. The legacy handed down by *Personal Influence* and related work was that interpersonal information sources carried tremendous credibility as trustworthy sources of political opinion (Katz and Lazarsfeld 1955). People's perceptions of the attitudes of more distant, impersonal others were therefore of little theoretical or practical interest. It was assumed that what was most important in explaining Americans' political attitudes could be found close to home in their immediate social environments.

Today there are numerous reasons to reconsider the relevance of the impersonal to American politics. A wide variety of historical changes have focused Americans' attention on the world outside of their immediate life space. Moreover, the literature on American political behavior is replete with examples of situations in which people's political behaviors are influenced by their perceptions of the attitudes or experiences of mass collectives, collectives that exist well beyond the boundaries of communities they know through personal experience.

At the same time that concern about situations facilitating impersonal influence has increased, research on the effects of mass media increasingly suggests that its primary impact is on social-level perceptions rather than on personal attitudes or beliefs. In other words, media are far more likely to convince people that public attitudes toward abortion have become increasingly favorable than they are to alter people's personal attitudes toward this issue. To extend Cohen's (1963) well-worn maxim, one might say that mass media may not be particularly influential in telling people what to think, or perhaps even what to think about, but media are tremendously influential in telling people what *others* are thinking about and experiencing. These perceptions, in turn, have important consequences for the political behavior of mass publics and political elites as well.

A few concrete examples should serve to illustrate this phenomenon. One of the most widely known current illustrations of impersonal influence occurs in the contemporary furor surrounding violent crime. In the American political culture of the 1990s, we speak about crime as if it were a peculiarly modern problem, with presumably modern causes

(*Economist* 1994). For example, President Clinton's crime bill was said to be offered in response to a "wave of crime and violence." According to public opinion polls, the American public is also convinced that crime has risen over the past two decades (Jencks 1991: 98). Crime rates in the United States have always been high relative to other affluent countries, but for most people the point of reference is not so much other nations as America's own past. And here there is clearly a pervasive sense that America is increasingly violent.

Nonetheless, public records show that rates of both violent and nonviolent crimes are no higher now than in the seventies, thus providing little evidence of an overtime increase. In fact, the most reliable measures suggest precisely the opposite (Warr 1994).[3] Most people also believe that crime has increased more in poor black areas than in white areas of America. Although blacks continue to be more likely to die violently, a black man's or woman's chances of being murdered were about the same in 1985 as they were in 1950 (Jencks 1991). Through its portrayals of others' experiences, media coverage has at times created "crime waves" without any concrete evidence of actual increases in crime (Scheingold 1991).

In these examples as in many others, people are responding to a media-constructed pseudoenvironment rather than their immediate personal experiences or those of friends and acquaintances. Journalists are highly selective in their attention to crime statistics. They may be most likely to report precisely those crimes that are least likely to occur (Warr 1994). In addition, they often report increases in the number of crimes without converting the figures to rates and/or without reporting simultaneous changes in population size (Warr 1994; Biderman et al.1967).[4] Moreover, as Jencks (1991: 99) has noted, "When crime declines, as it did in the early eighties, editors assume the decline is only temporary and give it very little air time. When crime increases as it did in the late eighties, both journalists and editors see it as a portent of things to come and give it a lot of play."

3 Media frequently rely on highly unreliable FBI data without telling readers about the well-known problems with those data (see Warr 1994). While FBI figures show a 66% rise in total crime between 1973 and 1992, the National Crime Victimization Surveys show a 6% decline. Violent crime rose by 24% over the period, but if population growth is taken into account, the rate of violent crime fell slightly (see Jencks 1991).

4 For example, in 1990 the Senate Judiciary Committee released a report that received front-page news coverage all across the country because it predicted that the number of murders would reach an all-time high in 1990. What journalists neglected to note in the alarmist headlines spawned by this report was that the population would also reach an all-time high by 1990, so that the projected murder rate in 1990 would be the same as it was in the 1970s (Jencks 1991: 99–100).

All of this is not meant to suggest that some pockets of the country may not be experiencing increases in crime. Some American cities are in fact more dangerous than they once were. And since many journalists are based in Washington, D.C., and New York, it is hardly surprising that their reporting in the national media reflects a far grimmer picture than what most Americans are personally experiencing. The more general point is that mass media play an indispensable role in the construction of social problems in the public mind. Their role in helping to create an impersonal social reality is most clear when there is evidence that public reality is operating independently of the aggregate of private realities.

Public attitudes toward health care provide yet another current example of a disjuncture of this kind. It is tempting to think that all the recent attention this issue has received is a result of Americans' mounting discontent with the health care available to them. But data from the past three decades suggest that there have been few significant changes in public opinion toward personal health care (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). If the situation is critical, it has probably been so for over thirty years. Even more surprising, survey data suggest that people with access to health care have given consistently high marks to their doctors and are generally satisfied with their care. Survey data typically underrepresent the most impoverished segment of society; still the consistency of responses over time among those who are accessible to survey researchers belies the conventional wisdom.

As Jacobs and Shapiro (1994) report, over the past thirty years, between 70 percent and 95 percent of Americans report being personally satisfied with the treatment provided by their doctors and hospitals as well as with the general quality and accessibility of their health care. More than 80 percent reported being satisfied with the care they and their families received as well as with the time and explanations provided by their doctors.

In the face of all this contentment, one has to wonder where the tremendous amount of support for health care reform comes from. Counter to what one might think, it does not appear to come from the many Americans who are not adequately covered by health insurance. Those who had had difficulty covering their medical expenses were no more likely to support universal health care than those who had never encountered such problems (Mutz and Chan 1995). Here, once again, the disjuncture between the personal and impersonal social worlds becomes important in explaining this puzzle.

While a relatively small percentage of Americans have been, and continue to be, unhappy with their personal health care coverage, perceptions of the collective well-being of Americans with regard to health care

have been overwhelmingly negative (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). This same gap is evident in support for health care reform. Twice as many people thought reforms would help improve the quality of health care for *other* Americans relative to the number who thought it would improve the quality of their own personal health care (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994). Of course, these data do not address the issue of who would actually benefit a great deal from reforms. But they do indicate that for most people reforms were perceived to be something that would largely help impersonal others, and not necessarily one's self, one's immediate family, or one's community.

Examples such as these would be entertaining, yet largely unimportant, were it not for the fact that collective public definitions of problems typically have a greater influence on American politics than aggregated individual ones. Just as people are more likely to hold government accountable for collective as opposed to personal economic problems (Kiewiet 1983), so too their general policy attitudes are more easily driven by perceptions of collectively defined social problems.

Despite many journalistic accounts to the contrary, the mass public's opinions toward health care reform were not driven primarily by negative personal experiences with the health care system. Instead, public support for reform was driven by perceptions of the experiences of impersonal others. Regardless of one's stance on this particular issue, there is an obvious danger inherent in policy attitudes that stem from perceptions of events that are beyond the realm of what one can personally know or experience. Since the "conventional wisdom" also provides a set of assumptions that guide the deliberations of elected officials and policy experts (Jacobs and Shapiro 1994: 212), policy makers may operate on the basis of inaccurate depictions of social problems or mistaken perceptions of mass concern.

Even more likely, policy makers may seize upon the manipulability of perceptions of mass collectives to further their own goals. These goals may or may not be consistent with the aggregate of individual opinions, but the impression of mass support can provide a powerful ally in itself. President Reagan's first term in office provides an interesting case in point. The press consistently exaggerated Reagan's popularity with the mass public, "in part because of an ardent, if cynical, belief among Washington insiders that anyone who looked and sounded as good on television as Reagan did *must* be popular" (King and Schudson 1995:17). According to presidential approval ratings, the standardized method for assessing presidential popularity, the "Great Communicator" was actually the least popular president in the post-World War II period. Nonetheless, Reagan's cultivation of the *im-*

pression of mass popularity contributed greatly to his tremendous success in getting Congress to support his legislation (Jones 1988; Kernell 1986).

These examples are just a few of a growing number of situations in which perceptions of collective opinions, beliefs, or experiences have important political consequences. In addition to providing empirical evidence on how such perceptions affect political behavior, a primary goal of this book is to explain how developments in this century have contributed to this form of social influence. Toward that end, I first sketch the larger social transformations that have facilitated the increasing importance of impersonal influence. Impersonal influence requires both mediated associations with others and the communication of social information across traditional boundaries of social interaction; two parallel social trends – changes in the nature of social interaction and the compartmentalization of personal and collective judgments – have contributed greatly toward these two requirements.

CHANGES IN THE NATURE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION

Impersonal influence is possible only when political communication is mediated, and thus indirect. One distinctive characteristic of contemporary society is the proliferation of indirect associations (Bender 1978; Coleman 1980). In fact, most theorists of nineteenth-century social transformations mention a shift away from communal, person-to-person relationships toward indirect associations with others (Beniger 1987). Indirect associations involve the mediation of communication technologies, markets, or other complex organizations, as opposed to direct relationships that require face-to-face interpersonal communication. Whereas political and economic affairs used to be organized on the basis of local community and face-to-face economic exchange, direct interpersonal relationships now organize less of American public life (Calhoun 1991). One need not meet face-to-face with a local seamstress in order to obtain a new shirt; it is far more efficient to order it from a catalog and have it delivered to one's home. Likewise, one need not show up for a Thursday night meeting in the church basement in order to promote environmental issues; one can send a donation to the Sierra Club and quickly become apprised of which products and companies to boycott as environmentally unfriendly.

As people increasingly interact with others through mediated systems, their need for information about remote and anonymous others also

increases.[5] Thus there is an even greater need for media content that provides information about the beliefs, attitudes, and experiences of people outside the realm of personal contacts. The development of communication technologies has both facilitated the proliferation of indirect associations and provided a natural source of information about impersonal others.

Media and markets are among the most prominent systems of indirect associations. Moreover, the decision-making practices of citizens participating in politics through a mediated system are similar to those confronting traders conducting economic exchange through a market system; "The right price, after all, depends primarily on what other people, not just you yourself, think that price should be." (Heilbroner 1991: 70). Early in this century, John Maynard Keynes (1936: 156) described successful trading as primarily a matter of gauging the opinions of anonymous others:

> Professional investment may be likened to those newspaper competitions in which the competitors have to pick out the six prettiest faces from a hundred photographs, the prize being awarded to the competitor whose choice most nearly corresponds to the average preferences of the competitors as a whole; so that each competitor has to pick, not those faces which he himself finds prettiest, but those which he thinks likeliest to catch the fancy of the other competitors, all of whom are looking at the problem from the same point of view.

The problem Keynes describes is similar to the situation confronting the contemporary voter in a three-way race or presidential primary; a person who bases his or her selection on strategic considerations will try to assess likely winners and losers by gauging the opinions of others in order to make a vote decision (Abramowitz and Stone 1984).

It is no mere coincidence that many examples of impersonal influence flow from the economic realm; media and market systems have a lot in common as impersonal means of communicating. Buyers and sellers of goods now communicate with one another through indirect rather than face-to-face relationships; people promoting candidates and causes also are more likely to communicate through impersonal means than they were a century ago. And economic signals representing the collective behavior of others communicate information in markets, just as impersonal influence suggests that the political views expressed by others communicate information to those who observe them. Just as some traders may "free ride" on better-informed traders by watching stock prices,

5 Coleman (1980) suggests that the need for this type of information spawned the development of the Columbia school of sociology with its emphasis on characterizing large populations. As the distance between consumer and producer increased, producers could no longer assess their markets informally, and thus market research was invented to fill this gap.

some citizens may free ride on those more politically informed by relying on the collective opinions and experiences of others. When collective public definitions of a situation directly affect subsequent developments, it is a peculiarly human phenomenon. As Merton (1968: 477) notes, this phenomenon "is not found in the world of nature, untouched by human hands. Predictions of the return of Halley's comet do not influence its orbit."

COMPARTMENTALIZATION OF PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE JUDGMENTS

The proliferation of indirect associations has not necessarily meant a decline in direct relationships. Clearly, people still have meaningful interpersonal relationships.[6] However, as indirect associations have increased in number and importance, the gap between the worlds of direct and indirect experience has widened. Distinctions between "everyday life" and "the big picture" used in common parlance are indicative of "divergent ways of trying to understand the social world" and "an experiential and intellectual split": "We contrast the quotidian no longer with the extraordinary days of feasts and festivals so much as with the systematically remote, with that which 'counts' on a large scale" (Calhoun 1991: 96). The impersonal has not replaced the personal as *gesellschaft* is often claimed to have replaced *gemeinschaft* (Tonnies 1940), but an increase in the number of indirect associations has made the worlds of direct and indirect relationships more compartmentalized. Social theorists generally concur that a primary feature of modern social life is an increased split between the world of direct interpersonal relationships and large-scale social systems, or what Habermas refers to as "the system and the lifeworld" (Bender 1978; Habermas 1984). Most importantly, they acknowledge the increased compartmentalization of what we know through lived experiences and face-to-face interactions with those who are known to us, as opposed to through sources that are mediated by those beyond our experience or acquaintance.

A recurrent finding in contemporary social science research is that Americans often have perceptions of the larger social world that are quite distinct from perceptions of their own immediate life situations. This persistent gap between individuals' personal and collective-level judgments is an important consequence of mass-mediated society. Mass

6 Some versions of this argument clearly do suggest that interpersonal relationships have declined in number and importance as impersonal ones have increased (see Beniger 1987); however, this is not necessary for the argument I make here (see Chapter 9).