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The Generalized Other

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The Generalized Other

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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.
>
> 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).

media play a crucial role in constructing people's images of the larger social world outside the realm of personal experiences and contacts. Although this idea is not new, its importance in the political realm has not been fully acknowledged. The tendency for people to "morselize" personal experiences (Lane 1962), failing to see them as parts of broader trends or larger phenomena, has now been amply documented across a wide range of issues. Perceptions of collective experience, on the other hand, are more readily linked to the political world. Thus it is precisely the type of (collective) judgment subject to influence from mass media that is also most politically relevant (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981; Kiewiet 1983).

In studies of public opinion, this split is probably observed most often in perceptions of the economy. In 1988, the *Christian Science Monitor* captured this phenomenon in a headline that read, "I'm doing better than we are." The article discussed the fact that according to the latest polls, the American public perceived the nation's economy to be in poor shape and getting worse. But this same poll showed that most Americans felt that their own personal economic situations were in good condition and likely to improve (Ladd 1988). Again, as coverage of the economy surged in late 1991, most Americans pronounced the nation's economy lousy and their own economic positions satisfactory (*Public Perspective* 1992). In 1993, a study of eight leading industrial nations concluded that "in every country, people are more sanguine about things close to home that they can know about from personal experience than about things remote and abstract that they can know about only by reading or watching television" (*Public Perspective* 1993: 92). In short, they seemed to be of two minds, with a split between the worlds of direct and indirect experience.

This pattern is not limited to the economic realm. A Carnegie Foundation study of college seniors' views of the future demonstrated a similar finding: When asked about prospects for the state of the nation five years hence, most felt the prospects were pretty bleak; the ozone layer was being destroyed, nuclear war was going to break out, and so forth. When these same students were asked about the prognosis for their own futures, the results were quite different; they were going to obtain good educations, prestigious jobs, make a lot of money, and live well – never mind the ozone layer or the pesky nuclear war (Levine 1980).

Enthusiasts of experiential learning see splits between personal- and societal-level thinking as the result of different means of knowing the personal and collective worlds; while one comes to us primarily through personal experience, the other usually reaches us by means of abstracted discussions conveyed through impersonal channels. As Palmer (1987: 22) notes: "They [students] have always been taught about a world out

there somewhere apart from them, divorced from their personal lives; they never have been invited to intersect their autobiographies with the life story of the world. And so they can report on a world that is not the one in which they live."

In political science, the largest body of empirical evidence bearing directly on the gap between personal and social levels of judgment comes from research on the political impact of personal experiences. A large accumulation of evidence shows that personal experiences are rarely connected to political judgments (Sears and Funk 1990). Whether the issue is busing, the Vietnam War, or any of a host of public policy issues, personal experiences – even those indicating an obvious self-interest – typically play little or no role in determining policy preferences. Surprisingly, even people's personal financial experiences and perceptions of national economic conditions are maintained largely independent of one another (Kinder and Kiewiet 1981).

While personal experiences tend to be disconnected from the political world, people's perceptions of collective conditions reliably influence their political attitudes (Kiewiet 1983). Candidates of the incumbent party do worse when the economy is declining, but the people whose personal financial situations are worsening tend not to be those voting against the incumbents. Instead it is people's perceptions of the nation's economic condition that is most likely to influence vote choice (Kiewiet and Rivers 1985).[7]

By providing a technological means by which indirect associations can be established, mass media may contribute to widening the gap between personal and social levels of judgment. Some corroborating evidence for mass media's role in encouraging this split comes from examining similar relationships in countries without well-developed national media systems, where researchers have found more of a link between people's personal sense of well-being and attitudes toward government (Hayward 1979). At the same time, the sociotropic pattern – whereby personal experience and perceptions of collective experience are maintained independent of one another – is common to many Western democracies with well-developed national media systems (Eulau and Lewis-Beck 1985).

Although evidence is limited, to the extent that the development of a sophisticated national communications network broadens the gap between the personal and political worlds, the sheer existence of mass me-

7 This is not to suggest that personal experience *never* plays an important role in political attitudes or that personal experience *never* enters into political judgments indirectly, by influencing perceptions of collective conditions. While there are undoubtedly some exceptions (see, e.g., Markus 1988), this general conclusion has withstood extensive examination.

dia on a national scale may contribute to turning politics into somewhat of a spectator sport – something that goes on "out there" but does not have much to do with individuals' daily lives. Since it is easier for people to connect their perceptions of collective experience to political judgments, mass media take on an even more important role politically when this gulf widens.

It is important to differentiate the argument I am making here from the usual claims about the extent to which mass media, and particularly television, have contributed to turning politics into a spectator sport. Liberals and conservatives alike have blamed media for a host of political ills including decreased turnout and general political apathy (Bloom 1987; Lasch 1988). Although impersonal influence may well encourage political voyeurism, I do not mean to suggest a normative comparison to political participation and decision making that was necessarily of a higher quality in the past. Most such comparisons consist primarily of a romanticization of the past and very thin empirical evidence (Schudson 1992; Converse 1962). Instead my point is that large-scale media systems have influenced the *nature* of political decision making by making it possible to formulate independent perceptions of the personal and political worlds. As discussed in the chapters that follow, political judgments that include impersonal components are not necessarily inferior to decisions made on the basis of information in a person's immediate lifespace and they do not necessarily demonstrate altruistic tendencies. Nonetheless, they may be biased in systematic directions that have important implications for mass political behavior.

Media content has been largely irrelevant to the changes discussed thus far; media influence social behavior "by changing the 'situational geography' of social life," rather than through their content (Meyrowitz 1985: 6). In this sense, the argument I have made thus far is reminiscent of technological determinists such as Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, who argued that the medium itself was what was of real importance. But media content plays an important role in facilitating impersonal influence as well. By providing information about distant and impersonal collectives that is often at odds with people's personal experiences, media content contributes to widening the gap between personal and social levels of judgment.

Media alone probably would not alter perceptions of the social environment unless its content included fairly large quantities of nonlocal social information. Thus change in the structure, as well as the type of social relationships, is central to creating the potential for impersonal influence. Indirect associations are different from direct ones not just in the sense that they are mediated; they also transcend locality in a

way that is typically not possible with direct interpersonal relationships.

INTELLECTUAL FORERUNNERS

Current social and political conditions clearly have increased the importance of impersonal influence. Nonetheless, its implications have yet to be analyzed in relation to contemporary politics except in the context of relatively narrow empirical questions. One can find, for example, literatures on the impact of exit poll results on voting behavior or on the impact of collective economic conditions on political behavior. But these studies are usually not considered to be related in any meaningful way. In making a case for impersonal influence, I draw on a tremendous amount of research done by others in addition to my own original contributions. My point is not so much to indulge in extensive literature review as it is to demonstrate that this broad collection of theories and evidence, heretofore seen as unconnected, is actually working within a single research tradition – that of impersonal influence.

In addition to being manifestations of a more general phenomena, they also share a common theoretical lineage. Impersonal influence is at root an old idea. Although many mass feedback technologies are relatively recent phenomena, this is clearly not the first time concerns have been raised about social influences that occur outside of primary groups or face-to-face interaction. In fact, concern with the influence of larger society on the individual was an important part of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political and social thought. In Europe, French sociologist Gabriel Tarde sought evidence of suggestibility or imitation in large masses. His suggestion that publicized suicides might lead to imitation on the part of others led Émile Durkheim to his classic empirical study of this topic.

Although Durkheim found no such evidence, his development of the concept of "collective representations" pointed to forms of social influence that might exist outside the bounds of traditional interpersonal relations.[8] These "social facts," or "states of the social mind," were said to represent a "special mechanism of collective thought" (Durkheim 1903: 45). Collective representations were said to represent entities which are "not ourselves but society alive and active within us" (Durkheim 1893: 99), and they were "endowed with a power of coercion over

8 Durkheim used the term quite broadly to refer to a range of forms that included science, religion, and myth – or any belief – that could be considered part of a "common reality."

individual behavior." They allow us to say that "the aggregate in its totality . . . thinks, feels, wills, though it could not will, feel, or act save by the intermediation of particular minds" (Durkheim 1898: 295).

Impersonal influence fits the Durkheimian notion of a "collective representation" in the sense that it refers to the impact or consequences of a collective belief or common reality. But an even more precise conceptual predecessor can be found in George Herbert Mead's description of the "generalized other." According to Mead, the way anonymous collectives exercise control over individual behavior is by entering into a person's thought processes. In his words, "The individual transcends what is given to him alone when through communication he finds that his experience is shared by others. . . . The individual has, as it were, gotten outside of his limited world by taking the roles of others. It is against this common world that the individual distinguishes his own private experience" (Mead 1934: xxiv).

Mead used the analogy of a baseball game to describe the situation in which each person's own actions are determined by his or her assumptions about the actions of others who are simultaneously playing the same game: "We get then an 'other' which is an organization of the attitudes of those involved in the same process," and it is that organization "which controls the response of the individual." The attitude of the generalized other is the attitude of the whole community and the individual is said to engage in an "internalized conversation" with this collective other, not unlike the external conversations carried on with others in interpersonal contexts (Mead 1934: 154).

Mead has been credited with extending reference group theory to the demands of modern mass societies by replacing the notion of social relationships built exclusively on interpersonal ties with a "social community of the mind":

> It is in the form of the generalized other that the social process influences the behavior of the individuals involved in it and carrying it on, i.e., that the community exercises control over the conduct of its individual members; for it is in this form that the social process or community enters as a determining factor into the individual's thinking. In abstract thought, the individual takes the attitude of the generalized other toward himself, without reference to its expression in any particular other individuals (Mead 1934: 155).

Impersonal influence encompasses precisely the forms of social influence Mead had in mind. At the same time, impersonal influence processes are quite different from the usual types of social influence that are studied in political psychology because they are not based on group identification or pressures to conform in order to obtain the approval of others.[9]

9 When identification takes place, the attractiveness (or repulsion) of the group identity is the source of power enabling a group to influence an individual (Kel-

Impersonal influence incorporates a wide range of reactions that individuals may have to their perceptions of the attitudes, beliefs, or experiences of diffuse others who are not known to them personally; in this one sense it is the antithesis of personal influence, which derives its power from the trustworthiness of interpersonal relations that bring firsthand knowledge of others' experiences. As elaborated in Chapter 7, group identification and normative conformity are undoubtedly important to understanding mass political attitudes, but they are often ill suited to explaining influence that flows from perceptions of amorphous and impersonal others.[10]

The seeds of interest in impersonal influence processes were planted

man 1961). In contrast, when influence is truly impersonal in nature, the power of influence does not derive from the attractiveness of the collective's identity so much as its sheer existence as a large-scale collective.

10 I have chosen not to incorporate influence processes such as group identification under the umbrella term of impersonal influence. At an operational level, this distinction is sometimes difficult to discern. For example, one could argue that even representations of diffuse opinion at the level of "all Americans" trigger group identification processes. To the extent that Americans respond to these opinion cues strictly because they derive satisfaction from defining themselves as Americans, identification is the mechanism through which representations of national opinion are influencing subsequent attitudes. But to the extent that people react for reasons *other than* their identification with the collective, the influence can be deemed truly impersonal in nature.

Likewise, if perceptions of the larger opinion environment alter people's expectations regarding their interpersonal contacts and that expectation, in turn, leads them to alter their behavior in some way, I do not consider that kind of effect an impersonal one. In other words, I consider impersonal influence to be occurring strictly when the motive is something other than the maintenance of personal relationships or the desire to avoid social disapproval. It is in this sense that impersonal influence contrasts with personal influence. I leave it to subsequent chapters (see especially Chapter 7) to describe the precise nature of the alternative processes that account for impersonal forms of social influence.

In circumscribing the type of phenomena to which impersonal influence will refer, this distinction points out that it is the nature of the influence process evoked, rather than the nature or size of a collective, that is the defining characteristic of impersonal influence. A process of influence is impersonal if it is not brought about by the personal relationship an individual has with the collective or by personal characteristics such as the likability of the group or other affective ties. Thus, in Chapter 4, for example, even perceptions of groups such as the "middle class" can evoke impersonal influence when the influence occurs even among those who have no affective tie to this group label. Instead of deriving power to influence from the trustworthiness of interpersonal sources of political opinion or the attractiveness of group identities, impersonal influence derives its power of influence from numbers. This is not to say that attractiveness does not matter to other forms of social influence – a lengthy research literature obviously suggests otherwise. But if a person is influenced by news that one American thinks Saddam Hussein should be driven out of Iraq, impersonal influence suggests that he or she should be influenced far *more* by news that thousands of equally attractive persons are of this mind.

by social theorists early in this century, but only recently have social scientists begun to investigate to what extent thoughts about collective others serve as potent social environments. For example, the contemporary work of Moscovici (1981) proposes a theory of "social representations," suggesting that people's inner representations of collective phenomena can change attitudes. Moscovici argues that these representations are created through communication and that they constitute an important social environment; they are a substitute for things we cannot directly observe, socially constructed realities that nonetheless influence our attitudes and behaviors. Like Mead, Moscovici sees the need for such a concept as an outgrowth of contemporary mass mediated society:

> In fact, for our "man in the street" (now threatened with extinction, along with strolls in the street, and soon to be replaced by the man in front of the TV set), most of the opinions derived from science, art and economics which relate to reified universes differ, in many ways, from the familiar, handy opinions he has constructed out of bits and pieces of scientific, artistic and economic traditions and from personal experience and hearsay (Moscovici 1984: 25).

Benedict Anderson (1983) coined the term "imagined communities"[11] to refer to the same kind of large, reified collective that concerns Moscovici. Collective entities that people recognize, but for which they have no knowledge of the other members as concrete individuals, are said to result in a new form of social relationship: "Thus we develop categorical identities like those of nations or within them those we ascribe to or claim as members of different ethnic groups, religions, classes or even genders. Some of the time, at least, we imagine these categorical identities on analogy to the local communities in which we live" (Calhoun 1991:107).

Long before terms such as "imagined community" had been coined in response to advances in communication technology, early twentieth-century social theorists such as Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and Robert Park had very similar concepts in mind. Cooley, for example, argued that advances in mass communication had made possible a "great community" since what speech insured for the primary group, mass communication made possible for the whole of society. Likewise, Dewey (1927:211) argued that "The Great Community, in the sense of free and full intercommunication, is conceivable."

11 Anderson (1983) uses this term in describing the spread of nationalism because nations are imagined communities in the sense that their members will never know most of their fellow members even though there is a shared identity. The cognitive awareness of "nation-ness" is similar to the reification of large-scale collectives necessary for impersonal influence processes. However, Anderson also emphasizes the deep emotional attachments that people feel toward nations, whereas impersonal influence assumes no particular affective ties to these amorphous group labels.

So while imagined communities have long existed to some extent, advances in communication technology have contributed to making them more imaginable. In particular, Anderson focuses on the effects of the development of printing as a means of transmitting information over long distances. Whereas location and physical presence once formed the boundaries of social relationships, printing extended these boundaries. Electronic media have accelerated further the building of imagined communities (Calhoun 1991). Since electronic media can transcend both time and space, the physical structures that once divided and defined social contexts are no longer determinative: "Where one is has less and less to do with what one knows and experiences" (Meyrowitz 1985: viii).

Media have abetted this trend to an even greater degree since people exposed to information from newspapers and television are aware that others are simultaneously consuming it. What Tocqueville (1835: 520) noted about the newspaper is doubly true of broadcast media with its vast audiences: "It speaks to each of its readers in the name of all the rest." According to Anderson (1983), it is this pattern of thinking and awareness of simultaneous consumption that makes entities such as nations imaginable.

Imagined communities facilitate impersonal influence because people can easily conceive of large-scale social entities as communities; they have been reified to the point where their existence is seldom questioned. Since journalists can also conceive of them, they can write about them, report poll results on them, and otherwise perpetuate their existence as if they were true communities.

Despite these similarities, there are important differences between social groups formed out of direct relationships among members and social categories defined exclusively by external attributes. The give and take of interpersonal communication is difficult, if not impossible, for members of imagined communities. The degree of trust and intimacy cultivated by interpersonal relations is usually missing as well. So too, theories of social influence grounded in the world of direct interpersonal contact often adapt poorly to impersonal contexts (Price and Allen 1990). Although small group studies of majority influence have been used as post hoc explanations for the influence of representations of mass collectives, most of the key factors influencing the extent of conformity in small group environments are missing from situations in which impersonal influence occurs (Mutz 1992a). For example, the "group" in this case is not particularly attractive, cohesive, or interdependent, as is typically necessary for normative social pressures to operate. While normative social pressures dominate in interpersonal settings where people interact in face-to-face contexts, the mechanisms

underlying social influence from anonymous and impersonal collectives are less straightforward.

We now live in a society where it makes a certain amount of sense to speak of aggregates of persons as social entities (Tilly 1983). In fact, the ubiquitousness of indirect associations makes it quite difficult not to. Reification of the systemworld is a nearly inescapable form of false consciousness, an "almost unavoidable condition of practical thought in the modern world" (Calhoun 1988: 233).

Moreover, as I argue throughout the book, this tendency has important political consequences for political elites and the mass public. For a long time, the received view has been that people are only susceptible to the influence of media in areas where they lack personal experiences (Zucker 1978; Ball-Rokeach and DeFleur 1976). Perhaps foreign policy attitudes were at risk of being misled by media misrepresentations of distant social realities, but surely with issues such as inflation or crime, people's perceptions of collective reality were firmly anchored in their own personal experiences and those of their friends and neighbors. In a large-scale society such as ours, even this reasoning becomes fallacious:

> In understanding the world about us, we human beings are increasingly drawn into beliefs about that which we cannot experience or personally recognize. We have beliefs about "society" that are public in the sense both of being shared and of being about an aggregate of events which we do not and cannot experience personally. A great many people in the United States have had direct and personal experience with automobile crashes and collisions. These are personal facts. The total number of automobile fatalities is not. It is a public fact. No one observes all the automobile crashes. . . . What is "true" about society is more than a reflection of individual experiences; it is also a set of beliefs about the aggregated experiences of others (Gusfield 1981: 51–2).

While it may have been possible to retain personal control over reality in the type of small, preindustrialized society Kundera described, it is clearly not possible in today's large, mass-mediated and industrialized societies. The kind of "social facts" that concerned Durkheim are readily available and widely distributed via the mass media. They are also a mainstay of political dialogue, for both elites and the mass public. Moreover, many contemporary representations of the state of mass collectives are based on compilations of statistical information that lend them a ring of legitimacy and authority. In short, they are ideally positioned to play an important role in influencing American political behavior.

On first consideration, those familiar with the social psychology literature documenting the general neglect of base rate information may doubt the relevance of people's perceptions of mass collectives to their political attitudes. After all, a sizable number of studies have shown that even when making judgments or attributions for which information

about the size of the larger population is obviously relevant, people tend to ignore or underweight evidence of this kind (Kahneman, Slovic, and Tversky 1982; Nisbett and Borgida 1975). However, upon closer examination this well-known evidence is not at odds with any of the premises of impersonal influence because it focuses on when base rates matter in predictions about individuals or populations within that collective. For example, the general neglect of base rate information suggests that people who hear about rising unemployment in some city will be unlikely to use that information properly in deciding how likely a target person in the city is to lose his job.[12] Instead, their judgments will be inordinately affected by the specifics that they know about the individual's personal characteristics, employment history, and so forth. This kind of base rate neglect is not the same thing as suggesting that perceptions of rising unemployment will have no influence on attitudes toward political candidates or parties. The dependent variables in this case are not individual parts of the aggregate that comprises the base rate observation. Impersonal influence focuses specifically on whether base rate information informs people's political opinions. As discussed at greater length in Chapter 4, attitudes toward political issues and actors are precisely the type of judgment most likely to respond to information about mass collectives.[13]

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

It is commonly argued that there is an inherent tension between being "scientific," particularly in the tradition of quantitative social science, and being historically relevant (Delia 1987). My goal in the chapters that follow is to do both: I first examine impersonal influence processes from a broad historical perspective and then provide concrete empirical examples of the operation of impersonal influence that are very much in the tradition of quantitative social science. Moreover, I attempt to go beyond simply providing examples of how impersonal influence matters

12 It is also worth noting that the literature on whether people use base rate information in making attributions is answering a fundamentally different question from the studies addressing the use of base rate information in social judgment (Kassin 1979b). The attribution studies use the null hypothesis as their basis for comparison by asking whether consensus information is utilized or ignored. The social judgment studies instead make comparisons with a formal probability model to examine whether respondents make appropriate use of base rate information.

13 In addition, the relative weighting of base rate information and evidence drawn from individual cases is relevant to how people integrate information from media and personal experiences in forming perceptions of collective-level phenomena (see discussion in Chapters 3 and 4).

to provide a microlevel understanding of *why* information about distant and impersonal others often influences people's political attitudes and behaviors.

Toward these multiple goals, the book is organized into four parts. In the remainder of Part I, I outline the major historical changes that have contributed to the increased relevance of impersonal influence in understanding contemporary political phenomena. I describe the rise of impersonal associations and their increasing importance in American political life, with particular emphasis on media's contribution. Over the past century, major changes have transpired in the nature of social relationships, the nature of media content, and the complexity of political decision making, all contributing to an increased potential for impersonal influence. In Chapter 3, this section concludes with empirical evidence bearing on media's unique capacity to influence perceptions of collective opinion and experience.

The two sections that follow explore in turn the political consequences of perceptions of collective experience and opinion. Impersonal influence is not a unitary theory so much as a collection of closely related phenomena that I have united under this umbrella term. Although these phenomena are similar and it is useful to consider their implications collectively, the theories that account for them differ substantially based on whether people are responding to perceptions of collective *experience* or perceptions of collective *opinion*. Both forms of impersonal influence can alter political attitudes, but people respond to perceptions of collective opinion and experience differently and for different reasons, thus they require separate examinations.

In Part II, I examine the role of perceptions of mass experience in influencing political attitudes. How, for example, do people's perceptions of crime or unemployment as collective-level problems influence their political attitudes? Consistent with previous research, I find that perceptions of collective-level experience matter more to political attitudes than people's personal experiences. This finding persists even beyond the well-documented economic realm. Do mass media either facilitate or inhibit the politicization of personal experiences? My findings suggest that media have the capacity to do either, depending upon the predominant view of collective experience that media portray. Individuals either learn that their experiences are shared with many others, and thus are easily attributed to government leaders and policies, or that their experiences are unique, which discourages them from holding national leaders accountable. The outcome of this thought process is far from predetermined. Thus sources of systematic bias in personal- and collective-level judgments have important implications for the extent to

which impersonal influence encourages or discourages political accountability.

In Part III, I explore the effects of perceptions of collective opinion on individual political attitudes and behaviors. How is it that people are influenced by their perceptions of the attitudes of even diffuse and anonymous others? In this section, I delve into the social-psychological rationale for these phenomena and outline a general framework for understanding the psychological mechanisms underlying impersonal influence. Although the potential for impersonal influence is not limited to one particular sector of the population, the mechanism driving it is likely to be different for citizens with differing levels of information and involvement in political decision making. Using empirical findings from a series of experiments embedded in national surveys, combined with studies incorporating measures of political behavior as well as opinion, I go beyond the social determinism of most bandwagon theories and test a model in which different segments of the citizenry are influenced by fundamentally different processes of social influence. As with perceptions of collective experience, people engage in internalized conversations with perceptions of collective opinion. When they learn that a particular candidate or issue is popular or unpopular, their implicit interactions with these generalized others prompt them to alter or refine their own political views.

An underlying concern throughout Parts II and III is the extent to which impersonal influence flowing from perceptions of collective experience and opinion serves to facilitate or hinder the extent to which the public holds political leaders accountable for the effects of their policies. Both forms of impersonal influence are generally assumed to detract from this end. In the realm of collective experience, the potential for distorted perceptions of collective experience suggests a lack of accountability that personal experience-based politics appears to insure. In the case of collective opinion, people whose opinions are shaped by perceptions of collective others' views are assumed to be unduly conformist, and thus their opinions are presumed to be of a lesser quality than opinions formed independently of such influence. In Chapter 9, I discuss why these conclusions are overly simplistic characterizations of the implications of impersonal influence for democratic accountability. I come to the conclusion that we would not, as a polity, be better off attempting to eliminate social influence of this kind.

To be sure, both impersonal influence from perceptions of mass experience and impersonal influence flowing from perceptions of mass opinion pose potential problems for democratic accountability. In the former case, the danger is that people will respond to perceptions of a

false social environment; in the latter, that independence of judgment will be compromised through social pressures emanating from mediated representations of others' views. But in order to evaluate these risks properly, it is important to consider the alternative mechanisms that might lead to greater accountability than would a system depending upon media.

With respect to the prospects for holding leaders accountable for the effects their policies have on citizens' collective experience, two specific possibilities are considered at length in Chapter 9: a politics rooted in the politicization of personal experience and communitarian approaches that emphasize renewing local community politics and institutions. Ultimately, I conclude that neither of these commonly offered alternatives provides a solution to the accountability risks posed by large-scale society or to the problematic psychological disjuncture that large-scale societies erect between people and their government. A system relying on people's perceptions of collectives beyond their immediate experiences undoubtedly has its risks, but it is preferable to the likely alternatives.

The dangers posed by mediated representations of collective opinion are real, but this type of impersonal influence also has the potential to encourage greater individual reflection and a higher-quality public opinion. Trends toward more homogeneous communities and the demographic balkanization of American citizens have made mass media an increasingly important source of information about people different from oneself. Although mass media clearly present a restricted range of viewpoints, people's interpersonal contacts are likely to be even more parochial. As a result of media portrayals of others' views, people are exposed to a broader range of political ideas. This exposure does not automatically compel them to change their views. But when multiple others endorse a particular view, it is more likely to prompt a reassessment of their own positions in light of this new information. Thus, contrary to the conventional wisdom, impersonal influence need not be synonymous with empty-headed, sheeplike behavior or mass susceptibility to media influence. A balanced assessment of impersonal influence must also recognize the positive contributions it makes to a democratic system. In a large-scale society such as the United States, impersonal influence represents the potential for greater political accountability and a more reflective public opinion.

In the concluding chapter of the book, I use mass society theory as a framework for explicating precisely what impersonal influence suggests about the nature of social influences on political attitudes and behaviors in twentieth- and perhaps twenty-first-century America. The historical transitions described in this book fit quite comfortably within the traditional framework of mass society theory. This extremely influential

social theory incorporated some of the very same trends that are central to the rising potential for impersonal influence: revolutions in transportation and communication, the emergence of a nationalized communications network, and the rise of impersonal associations – all contributing to an increasingly centralized society, with important implications for mass political behavior. But mass society theory suggested further that modern life had destroyed important social bonds and produced alienated, atomized individuals who were at the mercy of centralized agents of mass persuasion. Although the potential for impersonal influence depends on many of the same trends characterizing the mass society tradition, in Chapter 9, I come to decidedly different conclusions than mass society theorists did concerning the role of mass media and the prospects for accountability in a large-scale society.

It is often a tremendous leap between grand historical theories and concrete data; they never correspond precisely, and narrow empirical studies often seem a weak sister, paling in comparison with the richness of the theories they are designed to examine. A table of statistics from any given study seldom does justice to the theory that spawned it. This book attempts to combine the discussion of specific empirical studies with much broader assertions about one important dimension of historical change and its consequences for the quality of political reasoning. This hybrid approach is essential because it is impossible to comprehend the macrolevel consequences of impersonal influence without first understanding the microlevel processes underlying the effects of perceptions of mass collectives. By combining multiple methods across multiple political contexts, my hope in the pages that follow is to paint as broad a portrait as possible of how impersonal forms of social influence have altered the political landscape.