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POPULAR PRESSURES ON GOVERNMENT

The means by which the various components of public opinion influence the decisions of policymakers are often poorly understood. In this lecture Professor J. Austin Ranney of the University of Wisconsin focuses his attention on the place of television, the press, pressure groups, and the general public in shaping policy decisions. In doing so, he emphasizes the important role of the mass media in influencing the opinions of policymakers.

A lecture delivered at the Naval War College

by

Professor J. Austin Ranney

My immediate reaction at the outset of this talk, aside from the subject, is a contradiction of a good and bad condition existing in the audience. The bad is that I feel guilty about Professor Emery who, it seems to me, is not being treated fairly. I was unable to hear his lecture, while he is sitting and listening to me. This seems very unfair. On the other hand, it is a great privilege to have my son here, because he will be listening to me today for 45 minutes without arguing with anything. That will be the longest such period in our 16 years together. It is a great privilege having him here.

It is obvious that the constraints of time preclude my dealing in any detail with all of the popular pressures which

may influence the formulation of public policy. I do, however, hope to illuminate briefly a few of the important points which social scientists have discovered about the impact of public opinion upon major policy decisions.

The first of these points is that public opinion is amorphous. Many people think that there is a public opinion in the sense that everyone in the population is constantly observing the Government and judging its every move. We sometimes define public opinion as though it were an umpire at an athletic event awarding points to the skillful players. Actually, many people are only marginally concerned about most Government decisions, as is illustrated by their lack of knowledge

concerning them. Thus each issue produces a certain number of people who are concerned in varying degrees of intensity, and the composition of this group varies widely from issue to issue. Social scientists find it convenient to speak in terms of publics rather than *the* public, for this expresses the fact that the concerned public does change greatly.

Another important fact to understand about public opinion is that a policymaker, whether he be the President, a Congressman, a mayor, or a State legislator, is never dealing with the entire adult voting population in regards to any particular issue. He is dealing, instead, with what sociologists call the attentive public, which is everyone who is sufficiently concerned about the issue so that his action might affect what the policymaker does. The number of people who are so concerned, whether pro or con, varies with each issue.

The late Professor V.O. Key of Harvard once defined public opinion as "that opinion which policymakers find it prudent to pay some heed to." While this definition is not especially idealistic, it does illustrate the point. Not everyone whose opinion might have an effect upon the policymaker is going to be deeply involved in each and every question that comes up for consideration.

One of the consequences of this kind of analysis is that when one is examining the impact of public opinion upon the formulation of policy, he must be very specific about which policy he is investigating. There is a definite difference between the attentive public in relation to military defense policy and the attentive public in relation to foreign policy, and even within these groups there is a distinction on individual issues. For the purposes of this lecture, I will focus upon the question of public opinion and the development of military policy.

On the basis of several public opinion studies, we know that there are a number of military and defense policies which do evoke a considerable interest and about which the public is reasonably well informed and seriously concerned. The evidence indicates that of all the various policies along these lines, the one that evokes the greatest interest and response is the draft. More people are familiar with the draft laws than with any other aspect of defense policy, and more people have an opinion about the draft than any other issue relating to the military. When we examine, however, the public reaction to questions of a more technical nature which are of great concern to people more immediately involved with the Armed Forces—questions pertaining to the most effective type of weaponry or the level of manpower needed—we find that the public is generally not as well informed nor as concerned. We can even go so far as to say that in relation to these technical questions, public opinion, in its broad and unorganized sense, has little or no influence on military policy. The reason that this is true is essentially that the public is neither well informed nor deeply interested with this type of issue.

Another aspect of public opinion that does exercise a certain influence upon issues of this type is the pressure group. These groups represent a variety of organizations and usually have very specific interests. Two examples will illustrate this point. One of the most powerful pressure groups affecting American military policy for some time has been the National Federation of American Shipping which has been vocal in supporting any specific measure designed to increase the size and stature of the American merchant marine. They were primarily responsible for the introduction and passage of the provision of the foreign aid bill which provided that one-half of all cargoes financed by American foreign aid policy must be

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shipped in vessels flying the American flag. This measure increased the costs of shipping these cargoes very substantially, but it obtained a great deal of business free of competition for the American merchant marine. A second example of the effective operation of a pressure group is found in the U.S. Sugar Beet Association and its promotion of the issue of Philippine independence. If the Filipinos ever set up monuments to the heroes of their history, there will doubtless be one to the U.S. Sugar Beet Association. This organization of producers, which was having difficulty competing with Filipino sugar, actively promoted the independence of the islands, to be followed by the institution of a tariff on "foreign" sugar. They were successful in both of their objectives, and in the process they exercised a measurable influence on American foreign policy.

There are also a number of ethnic groups who have exercised considerable leverage upon our military and defense policy. One of the most obvious examples is the American Zionist organization which has had a very important impact upon our policy in the Middle East, beginning from the days of World War I and the Palestine mandate to the present Arab-Israeli impasse. There are also a number of other ethnic groups which have exercised influence, but this one example should suffice to illustrate the point.

There are, in addition, a number of general purpose groups which are concerned with American defense policy in general rather than with any one specific issue. These include the American Legion, AmVets, and the organized groups of the military services which support that service in the perennial struggle for appropriations. At the other end of the spectrum there are the pacifist groups, such as the Quakers, plus a whole series of ad hoc groups that have appeared to protest the Vietnamese war.

In some quarters there is a tendency to credit these organizations with the ability to dictate our foreign and military policy, but, in reality, if you examine their activities in any specific policy conflict situation, you quickly see that they are bound by very real limitations and do not by any means have unlimited and absolute power. To a considerable degree, the effectiveness of these groups depends upon the specificity of the goal that they are working toward and upon the general perceived relevance of that goal to the specific interest of the organization. A good example of this is the recent effort of the American Legion to defeat American participation in the treaty banning nuclear testing in the atmosphere. Between the World Wars and after World War II, the American Legion was very effective in agitating for veterans' preference in the civil service, veterans' bonuses in several states, and the GI bills which followed both World War II and Korea. On the other hand, when they have forayed into matters of more general policy, such as their opposition to the nuclear test ban, their effectiveness has been far less. This is due partly to the fact that they were not able to mobilize their membership as effectively on an issue of this type, as opposed to an issue of veterans' benefits, but it is also true that politicians who felt it was perfectly legitimate for the American Legion to be agitating for the rights of veterans were unimpressed with their credentials in the test-ban field. Consequently, they felt less constrained to heed them and saw them as simply one of many peripheral groups which had an opinion about the issue. If one were to examine the record of effectiveness of organized pressure groups and assign to them some kind of overall score, the success record would be less than 50 percent, and a very high proportion of the successes on that scale would be on those issues quite obviously specific to the purposes of the group.

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In comparison to the limited effectiveness of unorganized public opinion and pressure groups, there is good reason to believe that the most effective external pressures on policymakers in general, and particularly policymakers in the military, comes from the mass media. This is the core of the public opinion question, and it is a vast subject in itself. The whole question of the impact of the mass media upon the general public and the policymakers is something that is receiving increasing study, and this study is producing some interesting conclusions.

I will begin with the press, because it could be argued that from many points of view the press, more than any of the mass media, has a substantial impact upon policymakers. We know from several excellent studies based upon interviewing Congressmen and upper- and middle-echelon figures in the State Department that most of these people carefully read their own home newspapers and for obvious reasons. If a Congressman does not know what is going on back home, it may soon be not too important for him to find out what is going on in Washington. In addition to their home papers, most Congressmen and other policymakers also read the prestige newspapers—*The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Washington Star*, the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, and the *Baltimore Sun*. Perhaps some people from the Midwest may wonder why “the world’s greatest newspaper” is not included in this list. Rather than attempting to explain it, I will simply note that according to the surveys the above-named are the most widely read. What is remarkable about this is that the overwhelming proportion of the policymakers in Congress and the executive branch read all of three or four of these journals every day and parts of all six. It is really quite remarkable how pervasive the influence of these newspapers is. It is by no means infrequent that the first

order of business in the office every day is, “Did you see the story in last night’s *Post*?” or “Did you see what so and so says in this morning’s *Times*?”

The important question is, what impact does reading these papers have upon the policymakers? First of all, it provides them with information. In many cases the press reports events days and even weeks before it arrives through official channels. In addition, they present aspects of the situation which the official channels do not. It is also true, according to the surveys, that Congressmen trust the information provided by the newspapers more than they do that which arrives through official channels. They have a tendency to believe that anything they receive from the executive department, including the Defense Department, is designed to produce responses from them rather than provide information for information’s sake. Therefore, the picture of the world that is presented in the prestige press probably provides a great deal of the picture of the world which is in the minds of most Congressmen and policymakers. This may be regrettable in many respects, but it is factual.

It is also true that these papers, in a very real sense, create the agenda of discussion among policymakers. This is done by the manner in which the papers interpret the news, especially through their prestige columnists. These columnists—Walter Lippman, James Reston, Joseph Alsop, Hanson Baldwin—may produce in the minds of legislators a mild agreement or a violent denunciation, but they do cause the topic they have treated to be discussed. They are not necessarily convincing, but they are provocative. The conclusions drawn on the part of the policymakers may be entirely different than those of the columnist, but the columnist does play a very important role in phrasing the question.

Every policymaker is faced with a multitude of decisions and problems,

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and he does not have the time or the opportunity to give each one equal attention. He must therefore be selective and decide which of the day's events are truly important. It is of very great significance, therefore, to determine exactly how he delineates what is important. We have good evidence that one of the factors that plays an important role in making these value judgments is the way in which the prestige press handles the story. If it is something that most of the papers feel deserves a front page story, an editorial, and several backup stories, then almost inevitably policy makers feel that it is something with which they are going to have to deal. If it appears as a very minor story on page 15 or 20 and is cast in the role of an interesting sidelight, then politicians will feel that it is something that can be left on the shelf. As you can readily see, these distinctions can have vital significance.

The most important aspect of the influence of the press upon policy formulation is that the press creates a sense of community where no community exists. This is true also for the electronic media which we shall discuss next, but it is even more true for the press. Washington is a highly specialized place with little personal contact among the various departments and bureaus. The people who work in the Pentagon have little social contact with those who work in the State Department or the Bureau of the Budget, but they almost all regularly read the prestige press. Thus they all have the same perception of what is going on in the world, and much of this perception comes from the prestige press. They have a kind of unity, a community of discourse, which was not present before the prestige press developed to its present status.

A young political scientist at Columbia recently wrote a book which deals with the Washington community during the years 1790 to 1820. The purpose of his research was to discover just what

kind of communications network the city had during those years and how it affected policy decisions. He found that there were several different specialized views of the world and what was going on in it, due largely to the fact that the members of Congress and the executive department lived in several different rooming houses. There was no form of communication which covered the entire city quickly and efficiently. Thus the tenants in any one rooming house would discuss the issues among themselves and arrive at an entirely different perspective than their fellow Congressmen and policymakers in a rooming house a short distance away. The development of the prestige press has changed all of this and wrought a unity of outlook impossible in 1820.

Finally, it is important that we examine the electronics media and its effect upon policy decisions. Television is so much more important than radio in this regard that we can safely ignore the latter. The first important point to note about television is that its scheduling requires it to create news. I have often wondered what it would be like to see Walter Cronkite come on at the usual time and say,

Ladies and gentlemen, I regret to say that nothing of any great importance happened in the world today, so in lieu of our usual news program we're going to have a half-hour documentary on life among the Zulus. We hope to have enough news to fill our time tomorrow night.

That will never happen, for whether anything of importance happened in the world that day or not, there will be a half hour of news, and, likewise, if a great deal of importance happened there will still be just a half hour of news. The newspapers do not have this problem, for they can always reduce the length of

the day's edition or publish more advertisements. The size of the papers can vary, but not the length of the television programs.

Another distinctive factor with the television news cast is that there is a strong tendency to resort to what the trade calls "fender benders"—dramatic and exciting action such as live combat in Vietnam or a burning oil well—as opposed to less exciting recitation of events. This is true even though that action or event pictured live may not be of major significance when the totality of the situation is considered. The networks feel it necessary to produce such live drama for competitive reasons, lest their viewers turn off their sets or switch to another channel. If, instead of several clips of live combat, a network were to air a 15-minute lecture by some professorial type about the significance of the pacification movement, the few who did not fall asleep would switch their channels to discover something more interesting. Despite these obvious deficiencies, the telecast has several advantages, one of which is that it can air important events immediately rather than waiting for the distribution of the next issue.

So far we have been unable to measure the full significance of live coverage of important events to the formulation of policy, but the indications are that it is of great consequence. The emotional impact of seeing live color coverage of actual combat, burned-out villages, dispossessed Vietnamese, and the seamy side of life in Saigon is vastly greater than reading about these things in one of 300 other columns in a newspaper. The public reaction to Vietnam has been different to that of any other war in American history, and this has been due in no small part to the coverage given that war by television. We will not know for some time the nature or extent of this impact, but it has, without a doubt, been tremendous.

Television has its commentators, but none of them have yet reached the level of influence with policymakers that the columnists of the prestige press enjoy, and it is quite possible that they will never do so. One important reason for this is that they are limited by the time element—their observations usually must be made in 5 minutes or less, and even this limited amount of time is often scheduled at the end of the newscast in order to minimize the effect of channel switching. In this they are a bit like college professors, who are programed to run for 50 minutes and then stop. This limited amount of time lessens their influence on policymakers, although their television exposure does perhaps give them greater influence with the general public. While these television columnists may very well have a greater influence in the future, the handicaps

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Professor J. Austin Ranney is a noted authority in the field of political science. He holds a B.S. degree from Northwestern University (1941), an M.A. degree from the University of Oregon (1943), and a Ph.D.

degree from Yale University (1948). From 1947 to 1963 he was Professor of Political Science at the University of Illinois, and during that time he received the Senior Research Award of the Social Science Research Council. Since 1963 he has served as Professor of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin. Professor Ranney is presently the Chairman of the Committee on Governmental and Legal Processes of the Social Science Research Council and the editor of the *American Political Science Review*. He has written six books pertaining to political science, including *Democracy and the American Party System* (1956) and *Pathways to Parliament* (1965). He has also contributed articles to the *American Political Science Review*, the *Yale Review*, the *Western Political Quarterly*, the *Journal of Politics*, and the *Political Science Quarterly*.

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imposed by their media will place definite limitations upon it.

In this lecture I have emphasized the mass media and their impact upon policymakers in order to redress what most political scientists think has been a gross imbalance in previous discussions of public opinion. It was formerly the belief that policymakers were influenced by only two factors—a well-informed general public and well-organized pressure groups. Policymakers were conceived rather crudely as billiard balls, responding readily to the pressures created by these two groups. I hope that I have increased your awareness of the influence of the mass media with this lecture.

Since we do live in a democracy where freedom of the press and freedom of speech are guaranteed and where the mass media are big business, inevitably the situation which I have been describing will grow more intense. This is not ideal from the perspective of the policy-

maker. Anyone that has had responsibility has wished that he could do what had to be done without seeing it written up in the press the following morning. This situation, however, is something with which we must live.

I think, however, that I can conclude on an optimistic note. There is a very good analogy out of naval architecture which suggests that these freedoms are advantageous in the long run. According to this analogy, the contrast between dictatorship and democracy is like the contrast between a canoe and a raft. Dictatorship is like a canoe, which is easily steered, fast, and dry. If the canoe is a little off course, however, and hits a rock, the canoe will sink easily and drown all on board. A raft, by contrast, is difficult to steer, slow, and often wet. It can carry a great load, however, and is almost impossible to sink. About the only way you can destroy it is to cut the ropes that bind it together. If this analogy is correct, perhaps we are not as handicapped as it might at first appear.



Let not thy will roar, when thy power can but whisper.

Francis Bacon, 1561-1626, Essays